

The Tone-Deaf, Formulaic Approach Murders 'The Little Things'

Submitted by [JonHC](#) [1] on February 4, 2021 - 1:45pm

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Rating: **1.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are over 500 episodes of “Law and Order” but I’m not about to embarrass myself publicly by revealing just how many of those I’ve seen; let’s leave it at “a lot.” In the age of binge television, I know I’m not the only one that has taken a deep dive into the show and other long-running shows like it, but I know we can all agree why we continue watching them: they keep things fresh. Like any television series that has aspirations of longevity, they can’t stay the same over time, especially when it comes to detective procedurals. *The Little Things* pays homage to everything we love from an old-fashioned detective procedural but aside from being socially tone-deaf, it also has the misfortune of doing it a couple decades too late.

The story follows a local sheriff who is, of course, haunted by his past as he joins a big city case that triggers some unresolved PTSD. Sheriff Deke (Denzel Washington) teams up with former protégé, now detective Jim Baxter (Rami Malek) as they try to take down a serial killer targeting young women. If you’ve seen the movie poster, you’d know that it doesn’t take a detective to figure out that their main suspect is none other than Albert, played by Jared Leto. Casting alone should have elevated this film, but perhaps the biggest mystery to solve is why this cold case just leaves you feeling cold.

I didn’t go into *The Little Things* expecting Sherlockian levels of intrigue, but I had hoped that their borrowed elements from the neo-noir genre would be used as a vehicle for a new kind of story and not as the crutch that the film leans too heavily on. The morose ambiance fits the genre perfectly, but it is so unrelenting and with little to no pay-off that once you arrive to the end, you’ve all but given up on the film. This is writer-director John Lee Hancock’s follow up to his equally inconsistent and by-the-numbers detective period piece, *The Highwaymen*. Both had understandably dour tones, but Hancock’s saving grace for his previous film was that there was a bit of levity in the form of action sequences.



Photo credit: Warner Bros

When trying to craft an effective psychological thriller, there needs to be a level of complexity to later unravel. In this case, we explore the mental and emotional toll that especially gruesome cases take on the psyche of all law enforcement officers. Nothing new, except for reinforcing the idea that people in positions like this should have mandatory and regulated psychological examinations to ensure that they are still fit for service, which the main characters in this film clearly weren't. This, in part, leads into why *The Little Things* is socially tone-deaf, and why this is not the type of film that needs to be made anymore outside of a historical setting.

We've arrived at the spoiler portion of this review. In this section, we're going to explore exactly why films like this don't need to be made anymore, and with that, we would need to venture into the two plot twists. If you don't mind having these reveals spoiled, continue reading, otherwise skip this section until you've seen the film.

With Washington's character, we explore how the harsh realities of being on the job have taken an irreparable toll on him, and he tries to use his past mistakes to keep Malek's character from becoming as damaged as he is. Unfortunately, this leads to a terrible cycle of abuse of power and illegal cover ups. Through flashbacks, we discover that Deke (Washington) mistakenly shot a victim while hunting down a murderer in a dark forest. Objectively, it was a horrible, but understandable mistake, and would likely have been dismissed by internal affairs as a true accident if it were actually reported like it should have been. Thanks to the code of silence we've witnessed among law enforcement, we know cover ups are all too real, so instead of taking responsibilities for his (Deke's) actions, he teams up with fellow detectives and even the coroner to cover up his manslaughter and just add it to the killer's body count. If it had ended there, my dislike for this film would have been only a fraction of what it ends up being by the end.

Flash-forward to the present, where Deke and Jim (Malek) are hunting down a methodical serial killer who is meticulous when it comes to not leaving any traces of evidence. Enter Jared Leto's character, Albert, who could fit the vague, nondescript specification of the man they're looking for. It also doesn't help that Albert is purposefully creepy and displays a fascination with the case and the victims. Either way, Deke and Jim do many illegal searches to gather enough evidence to convict Albert, who seems to enjoy this "game" a little too much. This escalates to the point where Jim forces Albert to take him to where the missing victim is buried, only to be further toyed with by Albert, who either genuinely doesn't have any information or is just teasing Jim for his own pleasure. Regardless, guilt is for the courts to decide, but Jim reaches a breaking point and kills Albert. Deke tracks down Jim, only to see what he did and how he desperately needed the murder to be justified to keep the guilt from crippling him.

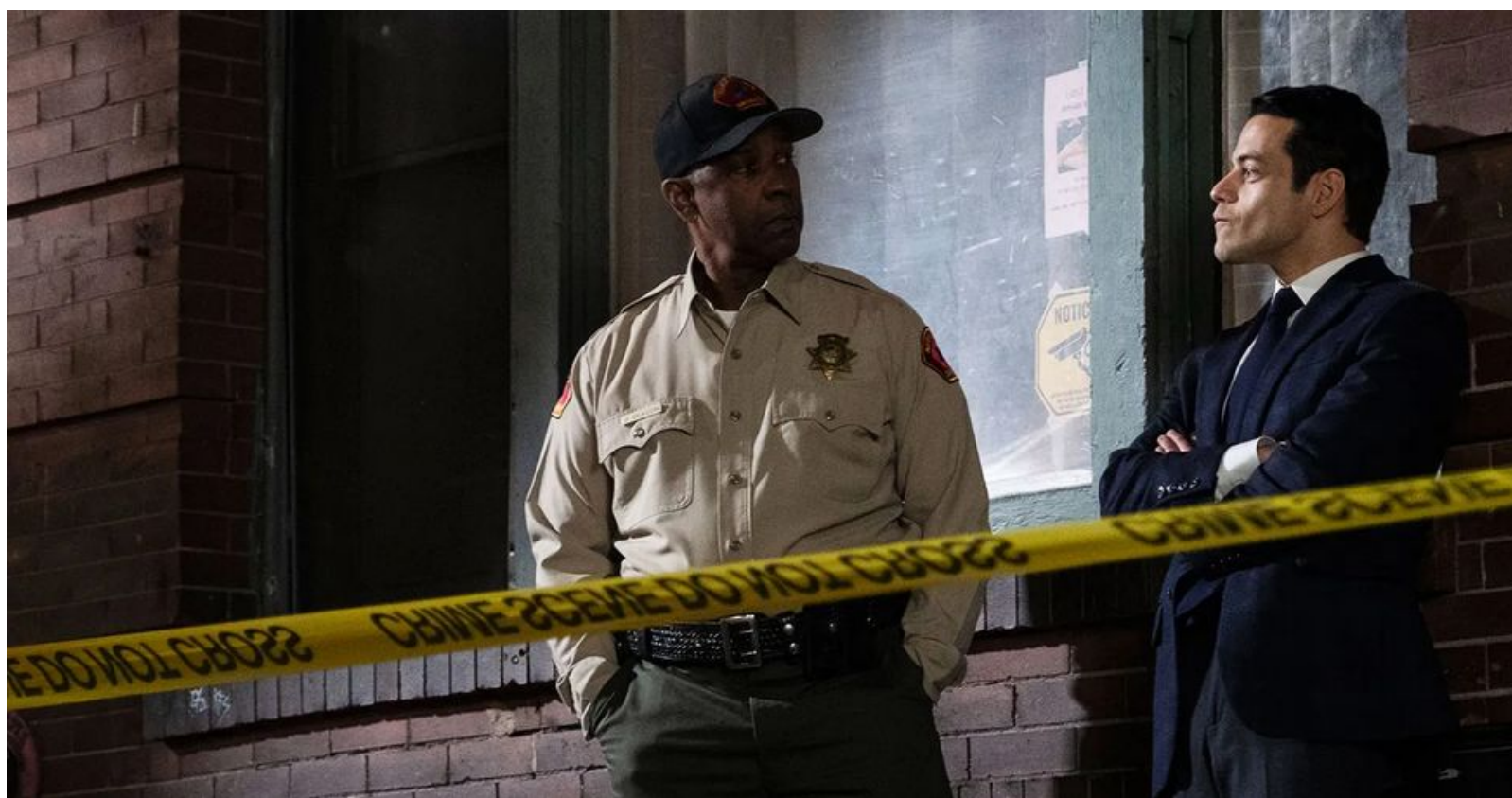


Photo credit: Warner Bros

Instead of turning Jim in, like any person who actually believes in the law would do without hesitation, Deke helps get rid of the body and makes it seem like Albert fled the city because of his assumed guilt. To curb Jim's guilt, Deke sends him some "evidence" he "found" to reassure him that he killed a guilty man, easing the strain on his conscious about having murdered someone in cold blood. The item Deke sends is a callback to part of the description given to them about the missing victim. This leaves Deke to shoulder this new burden, and while it is endearing in its own fucked up way, it's not the kind of message we need about our law enforcement right now. The fact that this entire film not only ends up revolving around 2 separate murders of innocent (until proven guilty) people but then continues to steamroll forward to justify their cover up, is far more shocking than anything *The Little Things* explores.

"The Little Things" opened in theaters and HBO MaX on January 29th. Featuring Denzel Washington, Rami Malek, Jared Leto, Chris Bauer, Michael Hyatt, Natalie Morales, and Isabel Arraiza. Directed by John Lee Hancock. Written by John Lee Hancock. Rated "R"



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