

Jake Gyllenhaal, Tobey Maguire, Natalie Portman Not Relatable in ‘Brothers’

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The transition from hot young actor to the domestic picket fence is about ten years and a shadowy crow’s foot. One day you’re a galaxy queen, superhero and Donnie Darko, next you’re playing house in “Brothers.”

The contemporary scenario features Tobey Maguire as Captain Sam Cahill, a hard-charging and disciplined Marine platoon commander, about to be shipped for his fourth tour into Afghanistan in 2007. His wife Grace (Natalie Portman) is the loyal military wife, ready to stay home and keep raising the family’s two daughters, with a little help from Sam’s father (Sam Shepard) and his father’s wife (Mare Winningham).

Complicating matters is the black sheep of the family, Sam’s brother Tommy (Jake Gyllenhaal). He’s just been released from prison, and his familial conflicts bubble to the surface when confronted again with his perfect brother (Shepard’s character is also a retired Marine officer). Tommy’s drifting continues as Sam goes overseas.



When tragic news surfaces that Sam has been killed in action, Tommy takes on a more protective attitude toward his sister-in-law and nieces. This nearness morphs into a mutual admiration between Tommy and Grace, with a dangerous liason about to develop.

Sam is not dead, merely captured by the Taliban in Afghanistan. He is tortured and abused before a miraculous rescue reunites him with his family. The secrets that will be revealed upon his homecoming will be an undercurrent in all relationships thereafter, weighing down the branches of this particular family tree.

Veteran director Jim Sheridan ("In America") presides over a rhythmic familiarity in the basic plot. The MIA soldier who becomes found has been a conflict in war movies and the domestic front since Edison turned the first shutter crank. There is a surprising predictability about it as well, such as the bad seed relentlessly lost until finding his redemption by protecting the home front and the returning soldier that comes back not quite right.

Maguire and Gyllenhaal gives these more mature men characters the old college try, but in the end are not up to the challenge. There is a certain look and feel to the modern soldier and the cagey ex-con that the two movie brothers can't capture. Gyllenhaal, despite his painted-on tattoos, can't help to display his perfectly white teeth and smothering good looks while navigating the bad boy. And Maguire, despite his military grade haircut, doesn't have the gravitas of a war hardened vet.



Bad to the Bone: Jake Gyllenhaal as Tommy in 'Brothers'
Photo credit: © 2009 Lorey Sebastian for Lionsgate

And the failure of the cast to provide realistic traits for their characters sullies the relationships. Natalie Portman is not ready for motherhood, she barely looked older than her supposed daughters. She also must have made an apparent creative decision to keep her schoolgirl figure despite having those two pregnancies.

Plus, it's bring-back-the-1980s time with Sam Shepard doing his best "Great Santini" impression. He doesn't seem comfortable playing the god-and-country retired military type and it doesn't help that his second marriage is to former Brat Packer Mare Winningham, who by her screen presence has apparently swallowed Ally Sheedy.

It is through these inconsistencies that a connection to any of the characters is hard to achieve. So when any highfaluting dramatic confrontation takes place (they are brothers after all), it feels actor-like, not empathetically emotional. All three principals have proved their chops in other films. Here it just seems like they're going through the motions of sad wife, the all-anger-all-the-time vet and a blah blah black sheep.

The transition to more adult roles can be hard for these formerly hot young actors. Especially in war-themed films, they must especially be careful not to step on career threatening land mines. Boom.

"Brothers" opens everywhere December 4th. Featuring Jake Gyllenhaal, Tobey Maguire, Natalie Portman, Sam Shepard and Mare Winningham, directed by Jim Sheridan. Rated "R"



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