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At the movies

Film focuses on comradeship

There's something about "underdog" films that ingratiate themselves with the public. I suppose that deep down all of us feel like the underdog sometime, and we can sympathize with characters like Rocky Balboa; we feel their pain and share in their triumphs.

"The Karate Kid" works on the same principle. The main character, Daniel (Ralph Macchio), is the quintessential underdog — small, dislocated (an East Coaster in California), and in love with the ex-girlfriend of the school tough guy.

The tough and his buddies are members of a brass-balls karate school, led by a sadistic instructor who drills his pupils like marines, teaching them to strike first and show no mercy. Daniel, who also has an interest in karate, is effectively driven away from that facility.

Shunned at school, Daniel finds friendship in Mr. Miyagi (Noriyuki "Pat" Morita), the maintenance man at his apartment building. Miyagi acts as a surrogate father to the fatherless Daniel and agrees to teach him karate. But Miyagi teaches Daniel karate for defense, and with it Daniel learns the philosophy and spirit behind true karate.

Saddled with an atrocious title, "The Karate Kid" comes under ridicule from people who have never seen it for aspects they assume are in the film. This isn't a Chuck Norris action film; it is the story of a relation-



Photo courtesy Columbia Pictures
Noriyuki "Pat" Morita teaches Ralph Macchio that true karate involves more than kicks, jabs and chops in Columbia Pictures' "The Karate Kid."

ship between two displaced outsiders.

It's this relationship that gives the film its spark because of the rapport between Daniel and Miyagi. More than just believable, the scenes between these two are outstanding in their low-key, subtle approach.

Morita in particular is outstanding here, but Macchio too shows the courage underneath his character's vulnerability without overdoing it. The two create characters that are likable, believable and, most importantly, real.

The film is somewhat predictable, but not annoyingly so. This film is constantly and correctly being compared to director John G. Avildsen's earlier success, "Rocky." Like "Rocky," "The Karate Kid" is all about stretching oneself mentally, spiritually and emotionally, as well as physically.

Avildsen and writer Robert Mark Kamen do stack the sympathy deck a little heavily in favor of Daniel at times. When Daniel is first beaten up by the bruiser, Johnny, his newly made chums practically desert him. Whenever the school toughs even spot him they continue their rampage of terror. The worst of the lot is the drill sergeant instructor, who forces his students to win at all costs, even dishonor and cheating.

In the end, though, the viewer is left with the light, triumphant feeling we're supposed to experience. This is a simple story, but it's that simplicity that makes it so good. Avildsen has another winner with "The Karate Kid," a superb study in the relationship between two wonderful characters.

The "Karate Kid" is playing at Cinema World.
By Sean Axmaker

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