



THIS TIME THE CHICK AIN'T LOSING

A portrait of the vigilante as grieving mother in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*

If, by some Christmas miracle, I were granted the powers of Prospero, suddenly capable of conjuring a perfect movie out of thin air, here's what I might do.

First, I would assemble my dream cast, which would certainly include the likes of Sam Rockwell (*Moon*), Frances McDormand (*Fargo*), Woody Harrelson (*True Detective*) and John Hawkes (*Winter's Bone*), four of my favorite character actors in modern cinema.

And then, all things being possible, I would enlist Irish author Martin McDonagh (*The Pillowman*, *In Bruges*) to pen a script, and I'd let him direct the thing, too, because surprising things happen when you bestow a preponderance of creative control on an artist who may, indeed, be possessed by genius.

Finally, I would ask McDonagh to tell a story that delivered tears and laughter and anguish and enlightenment in almost equal measure, and to do so in his trademark way — with the slice-and-dice brutality of a satirist who can scarcely conceal his own heartbreak over a world gone mad.

Apparently, Christmas came early this year. *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* is a tour-de-force, a blistering dark comedy that finds McDonagh, now 47, operating at the peak of his creative powers.

The film tells the story of Mildred Hayes (McDormand), a mother whose ferocious grief over her daughter's rape and murder drives her to rent three billboards along a rural high-

way outside town; the billboards bluntly confront the town's police chief, Bill Willoughby (Harrelson), on his failure to solve the crime.

Mildred's bulldog intensity (a kind of maternal inversion of McDormand's Oscar-winning turn as Marge Gunnerson in *Fargo*) puts her at odds not only with Chief Willoughby, a good man dying of cancer; it sets her against the entire town of Ebbing, and especially deputy Jason Dixon (Rockwell), a loose cannon of a man whose scattershot bigotry and burgeoning rage mask a deep and abiding pain.

McDonagh takes this premise and runs it to its utmost extreme, and it's amazing how much action and comedy he packs into what is, at bottom, a classic morality play set in the insular confines of small-town America.

And yet, rather than simply mocking rural hypocrisies, the film upends our pieties at every turn, revealing the hidden humanity of its characters. And, as usual, McDonagh does this without any concern for whom he offends; in fact, he's so good at what he does that he wrings hilarity from language and situations that move beyond taboo into a divine egalitarianism, as when Mildred kicks a girl right in the crotch or gives a priest a foul-mouthed dressing down that might be the final word on church hypocrisy.

This is what McDonagh does so well: By taking what might seem the low road, he actually levitates slightly above the corrosive din of modern life, and from here he swings his

scalpel, performing an autopsy on everything we purport to hold dear. The results are emetic, and the laughter you experience comes with a wince of recognition, not just for your own falsities but also for the deeper humanity that lurks beneath the confusion.

Three Billboards poses what would seem a fairly straightforward question: What does it mean to seek justice? Of course, this question grows infinitely more complicated when you start tossing in subsidiary issues like vengeance, forgiveness and acceptance. McDonagh plays with such motivational dynamics in surprising and revealing ways, upending and inverting and tangling our expectations as each character trudges forward in the tragic aftermath of an unsolved crime.

At the center of this drama stand Mildred and Deputy Dixon, refracted images of each other. McDormand, with her withering stare and sly gamesmanship, is fantastic as the mother who refuses to let her tragedy slip into the dustbin of history; it's an Oscar-worthy performance.

But this is equally Rockwell's movie. A combination of loutish swagger and bumbling insecurity, his deputy is a kind of embryonic everyman, easy to condemn but impossible not to like just a little bit. His arrogance and his vulnerability are inseparable. The pathos of Rockwell's performance is the strangled soul of this film, and his slouch toward redemption, however deplorable, is a wonder to witness. (*Bijou Art Cinemas*) ■

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