

Cast adrift

David Walsh reviews *A Simple Plan*

David Walsh
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A Simple Plan, directed by Sam Raimi, adapted by Scott B. Smith from his own novel

Dreiser asserted somewhere that he wrote *An American Tragedy* in part because he had observed the appearance around the turn of the century of a new social type, someone who would do anything, including commit murder, to gain entrance into the golden world of wealth and glamour.

Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* is most admirable for its concreteness. What interests me about this film is the connections it draws between diminished economic expectations, a hollow or merely perfunctory moral outlook and irrational behavior.

The story is this: on New Year's Eve three men find a duffel bag full of money at the site of a small plane that has crashed in the snow. The three are Hank Mitchell (Bill Paxton), college educated and gainfully employed, his childlike brother, Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton), and Jacob's friend, Lou (Brent Briscoe), a loudmouth and a drinker. At first Hank wants to turn the money over to the police. Lou, unemployed and in debt, easily convinces him otherwise. Hank agrees on condition that they wait until spring and if no one comes for it by then, divide it between themselves at that time. He also insists on holding the cash. When he tells his wife Sarah (Bridget Fonda), she too resists at first. Give it back, she says. He pours the dozens of packets of hundred dollar bills on their living room table. This has an effect. Later in bed she proposes the first of her schemes to improve their chances of holding on to the money.

Naturally, with this auspicious beginning, everything goes wrong--as it always does when small, desperate people try to get clever about large sums of money, something they're not used to being around. They get nervous, exude anxiety, make mistakes, mistrust each

other. Every one of Sarah's plans proves disastrous. Hank finds himself capable of extraordinary acts of violence.

It's interesting--and sometimes exhilarating and sometimes frustrating--to observe how an artist's work rises above, sinks below, but never coincides with his or her conscious outlook. In their published comments about the film, the director, screenwriter, producer and actors speak rather generally about the destructive role of money. In *A Simple Plan*, someone comments, "Money becomes a contagious disease, a disease that once touched, marks you forever." It's perfectly true that in America and elsewhere people have been capable for a long time of doing all sorts of things for money. Lots of films, good and bad, have been made on that theme.

I suppose what's significant about this film is that the pivotal figures, Hank and Sarah, aren't provided with the typical motives for desperate acts--poverty or innate corruption and neurosis. (Nor are they simply the victims of misfortune. They act with their eyes more or less wide open.) The pair are articulate, attractive and reasonably comfortable. They own a pleasant home. They have a beautiful new baby. But I think Raimi establishes the narrowness of their lives. Hank, despite his college education, works as a clerk in a feed store; Sarah shelves books in a library. In two brief, but telling, sequences we see that their employers give them little room to breathe. Hank's father, we learn, was a farmer unable to hold on to his property, who eventually killed himself. The film takes *as a given* that economic advancement is no longer a serious possibility for such people. It's the specificity of this background that gives life and interest to the not very unusual melodrama that takes place.

Of course a life of diminished expectations does not

necessarily lead to mayhem. The spectator also feels the thinness of whatever moral code it is that has held these respectable, law-abiding people back from behaving reprehensibly. What would hold them back? The inertia provided by church, political party, allegiance to country, fear of public opinion, a sense of responsibility to an employer, and so forth. Not much of that is in evidence here. The film is perhaps most effective in this. You sense that this snowbound town has been cast adrift, it might as well be in the middle of the ocean. Life there has little to do with life in the prosperous centers. Life there has little to do with life *anywhere else*. Everyone is isolated, on his or her own. Not much is holding anyone back any longer. The impoverished, debased moral climate that has been deliberately cultivated and the growing belief by millions that they will never share in the prosperity they see and hear so much--isn't that a volatile, unstable mix?

Raimi, best known for a series of stylish, cartoonish horror films (*The Evil Dead*, *Army of Darkness*, etc.), is obviously talented. He wanted to make a more serious film this time and he has. It is uniformly well acted. Raimi has worked with the Coen brothers, but I think *A Simple Plan* is considerably superior to the relentlessly snide *Fargo*. Ironically, his film falls short in the end because it suffers somewhat from the same failing it criticizes: a tendency to take shortcuts.

You don't feel, frankly, that the screenwriter and director have made the intellectual investment necessary. They pose a genuine dilemma, but don't quite have the resources to convincingly and compellingly resolve it. At the time of Hank's first act of violence, for example, there is no visual equivalent of the voice in Clyde Griffiths' ear: "But will you now, and when you need not ... once more plunge yourself in the horror of that defeat and failure which has so tortured you and from which this now releases you?" What a Dreiser does, and this film does not, is patiently and remorselessly build up a set of circumstances from which the protagonist, given who and what he is, can find no logical escape except through a horrible act.

Hank's action comes too easily and *too soon*. The process through which we would develop a grasp and even a sympathy for his situation, through which we would become *complicit* and potentially at least consider our own lives in the light of his difficulties, is

cut short. And there are other similar instances: psychological plausibility sacrificed to the supposed obligations of the genre. Indeed novelist and screenwriter Smith explains that "the book is more in the thriller camp than it is a literary-psychological novel. Whenever it became a question of exploring some moral dimension or driving the plot on, I went with the latter." I wouldn't think this is something to boast about, but we live in such times.

Nonetheless, whatever its shortcomings, here is an honest and absorbing film that tells you something about modern life.



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