

You can lead a horse to water ...

The Yards, directed by James Gray, written by Gray and Matt Reeves

David Walsh
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James Gray has done many things right in *The Yards*. Much of the film is a sober and sobering look at a society in which corruption is the standard operating procedure. If Gray resists drawing the harsh conclusions that seem to flow logically from his narrative, well, it's not entirely surprising, all things considered. No one can force American filmmakers to see certain truths.

Leo Handler returns to his mother's home in Queens, New York after a term in prison for a crime he didn't commit. He needs money quickly to help support his mother, who is not well. His new uncle, Frank Olchin, who owns the firm that manufactures and repairs New York City subway trains, proposes he enroll in a training program to become a machinist. Leo can't wait several years to begin earning decent pay.

He sees his old friend Willie, one of Frank's employees, with a large bankroll. Leo starts working with Willie, whose principal job it turns out is to organize the sabotage of competitors' equipment, so that his employer will continue to win contracts from the city. Olchin's principal business rival is an Hispanic-owned firm, guaranteed 10 percent of the business because of its "minority" status.

When one of the nighttime sabotage missions goes wrong, and a repair yards official is killed and a policeman seriously injured, Leo finds himself in a difficult spot. He is pursued by the police and his uncle also wants him out of the way. In the end, Leo, whose refusal to inform on his friends sent him to prison in the first place, recognizes that spilling the beans on Olchin and his cohorts is the only way to extricate himself from his predicament. In a thoroughly unconvincing and unnecessary scene, he names the conspirators to an

investigative commission.

The different elements of the film are worked out with differing degrees of thought, precision and artistry. Certain aspects are near perfect—for example, the atmosphere at borough hall, the seat of local government. Gray, or his staff, deserves full credit for casting Steve Lawrence, the veteran lounge singer, as Borough President Arthur Mydanick. Lawrence's performance as the smooth-talking and utterly venal politician, with his blow-dried hair and his thousand dollar suits, is flawless. Gray is to be congratulated as well for bringing Tony Musante back to American films. The veteran character actor plays Mydanick's thuggish assistant, Seymour Korman. Victor Argo, as Olchin's right-hand man, and Tomas Milian and Roberto Montano, as the two "minority" businessmen, are also fine. The spectator gets a whiff of the stench of corruption that hovers about New York City politics and the tens of millions of dollars in contracts that its officials hand out. Payoffs and kickbacks and cheating and lying to the public are a way of life.

The principal performers are also generally admirable, Mark Wahlberg (Leo), Joaquin Phoenix (Willie), Charlize Theron (Erica, Leo's cousin and Willie's girlfriend), James Caan (Frank Olchin), Ellen Burstyn (Leo's mother), Faye Dunaway (Leo's aunt).

But there is murkiness in the foreground relationships and other elements of the film, murkiness that arouses one's suspicions early on about the ultimate trajectory of the work. For example, Gray is making a film about working class and lower middle class life, unusual in itself in American cinema. He can't quite restrain himself, however, from being slightly pleased about it. An early and prolonged shot of Leo walking across the

subway repair yard self-consciously lets us know what's what. In general, the camera lingers a little too long in a number of sequences. We are not simply learning something about the characters and their situation, we are being invited to draw conclusions about the director and his willingness to film a “gritty” subject.

In place of clear and devastating social characterizations, Gray settles too often for individual dramas which don't say enough. Theron is convincing and attractive as Leo's cousin, but her role, in the end, is almost entirely extraneous. What she does or doesn't do has no effect on the outcome of the drama. And why do we need to see that Leo is so deeply devoted to his mother? It becomes a bit much. In the absence of a socially-driven motivation, Gray falls back on “individual responsibility” as Leo's inner compulsion. There is a silly scene in which Leo steers his male cousin back to the latter's mother. “You got to stand by your mother,” says Leo, or something to this effect. This comes just before his testimony to the investigating body, so we are evidently to assume that it must be this sort of sense of obligation that has seen him through the whole ordeal. The appeal to individual integrity seems inadequate in the face of the wholesale filthiness that obviously dominates political and business life.

It's a nice touch that Gray and Reeves have included the business about “minority-owned businesses,” another side of the unedifying scramble for money and profit. But what are we to make of Leo's decision, in the end, to put himself in the hands of Frank's Hispanic rivals? Is that really an alternative? The ending or endings are confusing and thoroughly contrived. First, Leo turns himself in and a deal is worked out, which includes the “minority” businessmen—who will now get 20 instead of 10 percent of the subway car business—whereby everyone agrees to remain silent about the bribery and sabotage going on. This is pretty hard to swallow, but at least it has some social and political logic. Leo has saved his skin, and business will continue more or less as before. Then, apparently after a further encounter with “mother love” and “personal responsibility,” Leo turns everyone in. The film would be improved by 30 or 40 percent if the final five minutes were removed.

It's an entirely unfair thing to say, but I'll say it anyway: if *The Yards* had been made by certain

Taiwanese or Chinese directors, it would have been less self-conscious, more accurate and less obliged to have a happy ending like this one that absolves the social system and shows how the individual, despite everything, can triumph. Silly.

Gray has directed some of the best scenes in an American film this year, but, finally, he falls short and damagingly so. Again, you can't twist their arms; American film directors will have to figure certain things out for themselves. Sooner, one hopes, rather than later.



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