Prayers for Bobby: Blurring out the most painful aspects

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Directed by Russell Mulcahy, teleplay by Katie Ford, based on a book by Leroy Aarons

Premieres January 24, 2009, on The Lifetime Network

In Russell Mulcahy's *Prayers for Bobby*, Sigourney Weaver plays Mary Griffiths, a middle-aged factory worker living in a middle-class California suburb with her husband and four children. It is the late 1970s, and nothing seems out of the ordinary in a life of touch football, anti-gay jokes and gospel radio. A loving family, the Griffithses are also devoted Christians who do not blink an eye when grandma announces in casual conversation that "fags should all be lined up and shot."

Meanwhile, Bobby, a teenager (born in 1963), is struggling with depression. When Mary learns that her son is homosexual, the world as she knows it is shattered. Humiliating attempts at "converting" Bobby to heterosexual life have disastrous results. In the summer of 1983, barely 20 years old, he drops off a bridge into oncoming traffic. Six months after her son's suicide, a devastated Mary begins a journey that transforms her into a prominent gay rights activist in the 1980s and 1990s.

The film is based on the book of the same name, written by Leroy Aarons, a California journalist and playwright. Born in 1933, Aarons was one of the first openly gay journalists in the American media, eventually founding the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association in 1990. He first came in contact with Bobby Griffiths's story through a newspaper article about the suicide, and reached out to Mary in hopes of understanding her transformation from Bible literalist to PFLAG activist (the association of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays).

The book is the closest we come to understanding the processes involved in young Bobby's suicide. It contains difficult passages from his personal diary where one feels the self-hatred, loneliness and confusion first-hand. Aarons demonstrates the contradictory signals Bobby received, as the gay rights movement flourished just across the bay in San Francisco and Harvey Milk was elected the first openly gay public official in a major city while his mother preached a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible at home.

Bobby was an ultrasensitive young man with a paper-thin ego living in a mystical world of "evil forces." He had lively friendships with many gay and lesbians his age, and had a guilt-ridden but active sex life. He also worked as a prostitute, sharing the earnings with his unsuspecting mother, and expressed hatred for himself and others at the drop of a hat.

Aarons's book also recounts the frustrations Mary felt, not just as a God-fearing mother of a homosexual son, but as a daughter seeking the approval of a distant and abusive mother, a wife terrified of her husband's infidelity and, finally, as an abuser of pharmaceutical drugs. Aarons's *Prayers* paints a portrait of a loving family broken up not by a single nagging prejudice, but a combination of social forces and circumstances that are at work in many middle-class American families. The filmed version of the Griffiths story, on the other hand, ignores the details and complexities of this life.

Born in 1953 in Melbourne, Australia, Russell Mulcahy's most recent directing credits include *Zen in the Art of Slaying Vampires* (2008), *The Scorpion King 2: Rise of a Warrior* (2008), *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007) and *The Curse of King Tut's Tomb* (2006). After 20 years of directing music videos (Mulcahy's was the first music video ever aired on MTV) and straight-to-video product, Mulcahy directed four episodes of

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Queer as Folk, the US counterpart of a British soap opera focused on gay men.

Screenwriter Katie Ford has written the screenplays for *Miss Congeniality* (2000), *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed & Fabulous* (2005), a TV remake of *Little House on the Prairie* (2005) and an episode of *Desperate Housewives* (2005).

All in all, not all that promising, when what's needed are individuals attuned to the profound discontents of modern American life.

Mulcahy and Ford's history, this combined decision-making experience within Hollywood genre films each costing upwards of $40 million to manufacture, is relevant. In *Prayers for Bobby*, every scene, camera angle and line of dialogue are informed by it. Ford's Mary is a "tough-cookie" type with a clean record. Her troubled family history, paranoid fears about her marriage and bout with drug addiction are omitted. No clues as to why she so tightly holds onto her beliefs and forces them on her children are given. Bobby, whose often rage-fueled journal entries expressed the desire to "claw out the eyes" of family members and who longed for a man to hold him "more than anything in the world," is irrevocably sanitized.

Shockingly, Ford goes as far as supplying Bobby with a cheerleader girl friend at the start, and a steady, picture-perfect boy friend as the film progresses. Mulcahy's broad directing generalizes everyone in sight. A scene in a raucous gay bar is made less intimidating by blurring out the faces in the crowd. Bobby's exchanges with friends and family are limited to sitcom clichés and dialogue.

Weaver's performance as Mary stands out, especially in moments when Mary realizes the monumental nature of her error. In the film's coda, Weaver delivers Mary's speech to a room full of local churchgoers that hints at true loss. But with the "polished" feel of Ford's script and Mulcahy's cinematic "choices," it is an uphill battle for all the performers involved.

Given the pressures with which an artist must contend within the Hollywood environment—satisfying investors, advertisers, censors and the network—it is no surprise that *Prayers* is as compromised as it is. But Mulcahy and Ford have not exactly put up a struggle. Ford's script is a 107-page effort that scene by scene seeks to make tragedy, complexity and anguish too easily palatable for its audience. That is the sort of contradiction a film attempting to "raise awareness" cannot afford to contain.

An easy-to-digest, "low-calorie" artistic rendering of such a subject, which purports to bring the various elements into focus while blurring out their most painful aspects, does no one much good. This is the mechanism in place for *Prayers for Bobby*, and it is the result of many years of decline within the filmmaking model at large in Hollywood. Despite the best intentions of the people involved with the project, the film is half-dead on arrival.

For recommended films dealing with similar subjects, see *Penda's Fen* ("Play for Today," 1974, dir. Alan Clarke), *Fox and His Friends* (1975, dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder), *2by4* (1998, dir. Jimmy Smallhorne).

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