

# Atom Egoyan's *Adoration*: Also not very compelling

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*Written and directed by Atom Egoyan*

In Atom Egoyan's *Adoration*, Simon (Devon Bostick) is a high school student in Toronto. In French class, his teacher, Sabine (Arsinée Khanjian), dictates a story about an Arab would-be terrorist who plants a bomb in the luggage of his pregnant fiancée. Only the efforts of Israeli security agents forestall disaster.

Simon seems deeply affected by the events recounted, and his teacher suggests that he rewrite it, turning himself into the son of the terrorist and the woman he was prepared to sacrifice. Simon presents himself to his astonished and horrified classmates in this light. The story spreads beyond his school, to the Internet, and becomes something of a sensation. Sabine is dismissed for her role in the affair.

In fact, Simon's parents have died some years previously in an automobile accident, and the boy has been living with his uncle, Tom (Scott Speedman), who drives a tow truck. Much of Tom's life has involved overcoming his sister's tragic death and the oppressive, bigoted influence of his father (Kenneth Welsh). The older man, a devout Christian, and his daughter's husband, of Middle Eastern descent, had clashed repeatedly.

Sabine, too, has a connection to Simon's family history. She seems to be the opposite of an "avenging angel." In the end, she, Simon and Tom, the survivors of personal trauma, are obliged to find some common emotional ground.

*Adoration* contains certain convincing elements and, unfortunately, a good many more unconvincing ones. Speedman as Tom is most effective, portraying a man whose life has been stunted and damaged by events beyond his control. His bitterness and brittle psyche leave him vulnerable, despite his tough exterior, to various blows. Where Egoyan is on concrete ground, it is obvious he can guide actors, or at least permit them, to find some truth in their efforts. Arsinée Khanjian is perfectly fine too, although her character is something of an unnecessary enigma.

The other performances are stiff and unwieldy. In Simon's fantasy about his father as a terrorist and his mother a saintly victim, the actors (Noam Jenkins and Rachel Blanchard) are

embarrassingly directed.

Egoyan, an Armenian-Canadian, has been writing and directing independent feature films for two decades (*Exotica*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Ararat*). He has his admirers. In my opinion, the filmmaker's concerns, about history, technology and family life, are not advanced or worked through forcefully, and the results are generally schematic, distant and dramatically contrived.

The overall effect is rather provincial: a report given by someone not directly involved in great events or deeply committed to anything, aimed at an audience of people concentrated on secondary or tertiary matters (more bluntly, their own selves).

Egoyan is "obsessed with identity," he explains. Given the history of the Armenians in the twentieth century, obsessiveness is understandable. However, under more favorable conditions, that history might have propelled an artist to grapple with the circumstances, and social order, that made the terrible fate of the Armenians possible.

As it is, the "common threads" that appear in much of Egoyan's work, according to his film's production notes, include "the differences between appearance and reality; and the subjective nature of truth; prismatic, fragmented structures; multiple time frames and points of view; rich and complex characters; and the dynamics of family." This is rather banal.

*Adoration* seems to be arguing for genuinely intimate contact, personal influence, as opposed to "the sea of responses Simon is dealing with over the Internet" (Egoyan, cited in the production notes). The director is concerned, as he told an interviewer, by the "velocity and acceleration [of contemporary technology], which is troubling because people don't have time to consider.... It sets up a number of possibilities but it's open-ended, by its nature. You still need a journey in the physical world."

He told a press conference last year that the "film is ultimately about finding that one person who can help us understand our history.... I am more concerned with emotional concerns of people rather than technologies."

Why does one exclude the other? Of course, the Internet can be a source of confusion and even disorientation, but one cannot help feeling that there is something insular and backward in Egoyan's approach. The director sets up his straw man—this provocative fictional identity launched into cyberspace by a troubled adolescent—and then knocks it down. There seems no reason to set up the process of clarification about one's personal identity against the gathering of knowledge and information from a vast array of sources.

In regard to broader issues, the film offers meager insight. Everything is reduced to rather small change. Pent-up rage is bad for you, we learn. Religious fanaticism is also harmful. Revenge, presumably, is something to avoid. One's identity is not something to trifle with, by creating, for example, false names and histories, in this age of online chaos. One should rather "find objects and places which give a sense of meaning."

Anger, someone says, "sucks up the intelligence." This is simply not true. Anger can also concentrate the senses and make one more aware of one's situation. To be honest, that is a philistine comment.

"Being a victim is seductive." This might have very nasty connotations, under certain conditions. Are there actual victims of society and history, or do people suffer primarily from a psychological need to feel themselves victimized?

There are many unresolved questions about the drama. Why does Sabine act so recklessly and irresponsibly in regard to Simon, urging him to press on with his fantasy? We never receive a satisfactory reply. It is not psychologically convincing, any more than her appearance at Tom's door in a burka and elaborate mask.

Is it plausible that Simon, as unsettled emotionally as he may be, could actually identify his father (perhaps responsible for a car accident)—even in a fantasy—as a terrorist? (Sabine: "Your father planted a bomb on your mother?" Simon: "Sort of.") Isn't there, incidentally, someone in Simon's class, or in his immediate circle of acquaintances, who knows that his parents died in a car crash and that his father was not a terrorist? The contrivances add up, each one draining a portion of the emotional impact.

As for insight into contemporary events, *Adoration* contributes little. Although Sabine refers to her family being victims in Beirut, there is no deep feeling for the suffering or the oppressed here. One does not want to be offensive, but the voice of the complacent Toronto middle class comes across loud and clear: "These are rather painful and overwhelming events, and it would be much better if people simply lowered their voices and took a deep breath."

The production notes observe that one of the "original

inspirations for the film came from a 1986 news story Egoyan had read about a Jordanian man who sent his pregnant Irish girlfriend on an El Al flight with a bomb in her handbag, of which she had no knowledge until security found it."

The writer director adds: "The story always struck me because it was one of the first examples of how extreme a terrorist act could be and how one could turn someone close into an abstraction—not only his fiancée but also an unborn child. I came across the story again in 2006 and began to wonder about the child and the legacy of being raised knowing what your father had done."

Egoyan is referring to the case of Nezar Hindawi, who packed explosives into his girlfriend's carry-on bag in April 1986. Hindawi was accused of working for Syrian intelligence. There have, however, been serious allegations that the Jordanian was actually recruited, unwittingly, by a Mossad agent, as part of an effort to discredit the Syrian regime (the British government broke off relations with Damascus as a result of the episode). Moreover, the claim has been made that Hindawi had no political cause, and wanted to get rid of the unfortunate woman, who had become an annoyance to him.

*Adoration* takes the 1986 events at face value, as it does too much of life.

A decade ago I wrote: "Canadian Atom Egoyan is no doubt a talented individual, but doesn't seem to have a great deal to say. I feel about *Felicia's Journey*, the story of repressed and psychotic catering manager and the young Irish girl whom he intends as his next victim, much as I did about *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997). These are slight, not very compelling works in which the director has tried much too hard to invest some psychological complexity."



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