

Stephen Daldry's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: Not really a movie about 9/11, whatever else it might be

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Directed by Stephen Daldry, screenplay by Eric Roth, based on the novel by Jonathan Safran Foer

British filmmaker Stephen Daldry's fourth feature, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, deals with a shattering family loss caused by the September 11, 2001 attacks. In his new movie, the director of *Billy Elliot* (2000), *The Hours* (2002) and *The Reader* (2008) tells the story of how surviving relatives recover and regroup.

The film's narrator is eleven-year-old New Yorker, Oskar Schell (Thomas Horn). His father, Thomas Schell (Tom Hanks), was in the World Trade Center on the morning of 9/11. One year after "the worst day," as Oskar calls it, the boy and his mother, Linda (Sandra Bullock), barely communicate. Oskar hides under his bed, repeatedly listening to the last six messages his father left on the Schells' answering machine. (The family is perhaps only a "shell" of its former self?)

His mother, unaware of the messages, apparently can't help Oskar, not only because she herself is anguished, but because she was never able to compete with the bond between Oskar and his father.

"The way I see the world was a gift," the borderline autistic and fiercely intelligent boy had been frequently told by his father. His unusual parent devised "reconnaissance missions," scavenger hunts and Atlantis-inspired searches for evidence of the lost sixth borough of New York City. These were intended to help Oskar, laden with phobias, in his ventures as an "amateur" pacifist, inventor, and Stephen Hawking fan. The boy relieves his chronic stress by shaking his tambourine.

Trying to make sense of "the worst day" leads Oskar to a mysterious key in his dad's closet, which is in a small envelope marked "Black." He then obsessively organizes a quest to find what the key unlocks, seeing it as another mission that will keep him connected to his father.

With his tambourine and a gasmask given to him by his grandmother (Zoe Caldwell), he begins to visit on foot—subways make him panicky—all the city's 400-plus people named Black. Early on, Oskar is joined by an elderly man (Max von Sydow), a renter in his grandmother's apartment, who was rendered mute, Oskar has been told, by the horrors of the fire bombing of Dresden in World War II.

Oskar's eccentric journey is a wound healer. The film winds down to a tidy finale, with some emotionally charged epiphanies in the process.

Extremely Loud relies largely on an astonishing performance by Horn, a non-professional discovered when he won *Kids Jeopardy*. He is omnipresent in the lengthy film and his mastery of rapid-fire and complicated lines is remarkable, especially given the wide and intense emotional range demanded of the young actor. Horn is assisted with fine performances by Hanks, Bullock, von Sydow, John Goodman, Viola Davis (*The Help*) and Jeffrey Wright.

Most cohesive and interesting is the first portion of the movie, which establishes the relationship between Oskar and his father. Considerably more tedious, however, is Oskar's semi-hysterical, and therefore tambourine-rattling (and audience nerve-rattling), expedition through the city.

There are certain evocative and moving moments in Daldry's film. In one such sequence, Bullock's character watches an already smoking and seriously damaged World Trade Center from the window of her office high-rise as she talks on the phone with her husband, who is on the 105th floor of the collapsing building.

Also, Thomas Schell's final messages, passing from hope to despair, on the family's answering machine are jarring. The surreal images of falling bodies interspaced in the film inevitably hit home.

However, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* is not, at its heart, a movie about what occurred on September 11, 2001, and what happened afterward. At least, the film adds little to our understanding of the event or its implications. Indeed, the use of 9/11 in a movie mostly interested in other things, such as making rather abstract "universal" points about parenthood, the wisdom of the aged and the need for reconciliation, is a false flag. Nearly any seriously tragic episode would have sufficed as a platform for the film's rather pedestrian concerns.

As the mere invocation of 9/11 tends to produce its own set of emotional reactions and expectations, Daldry apparently felt he was able to proceed without offering any concrete and specific analysis of the cataclysmic incident. In short, *Extremely Loud* involves a degree of manipulation, conscious or otherwise.

In an interview with Indiewire, the director stated that "everybody's got their own 9/11 stories. And everybody has their own way of looking at it ... It will be too much for some people, and other people might find it difficult, but it has to be a personal response." This is not very helpful.

The fact that during the past eleven and a half years the September 2001 attack has been the official pretext for unending wars, repression and police-state measures suggests that "everybody's ... personal responses" are hardly the point. The artist's job is to get at the *objective* truth of the event. He or she might have some responsibility, one would think, to confront the American state's disastrous "response" to 9/11 and its consequences as part of any serious exploration. That Daldry's eleven-year-old central character is unable to generalize about the episode does not let *the filmmaker* off the hook, as he

would seem to prefer.

Daldry has specialized to this point in his career in carefully made, intelligent and intelligible middle-brow films. He brings talented actors together in literate efforts. These are the sort of movies, under present conditions, that seem designed (and destined) to win various industry and media awards, especially in the US. His four features, including *Extremely Loud*, have all received Academy Award nominations.

Unfortunately, along with a number of his British contemporaries who have known success recently in Hollywood, Daldry's artistry has been relatively evasive. He seems determined to try to please everyone. On a number of fronts, he appears to be searching for the golden mean, attempting to bridge nationalities, sexual orientations, political sentiments and so forth. He preaches reconciliation, the dissolving of unpleasant social conflicts and contradictions. Responding to an event such as 9/11, according to Daldry's standpoint, should be about healing and redemption, for both "Main Street" and Wall Street—the film has working class and upper middle class types coming together.

Although Daldry is commendably interested in historical and social issues, his movies often focus on and revolve around nothing more than a plea for tolerance towards the "sensitive few." Whether about an odd, dancing kid from a crumbling coal-mining community in Britain (*Billy Elliot*), an unhappy housewife in postwar Los Angeles (*The Hours*), a German teenager who strikes up a friendship with a female Nazi (*The Reader*), or an eccentric boy dealing with a 9/11 tragedy, Daldry's liberal-minded films generally have an underbelly of complacency. In his hands, important places and times are largely reduced to banal truisms.

Perhaps it is thanks to Daldry's competent, but rather bland artistry, that the London organizing committee has tapped him to executive produce the ceremonies for the 2012 Olympics in that city and imbue them, presumably, with a populist-nationalist coloring.



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