

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri: A vengeful mother stands up to the local “patriarchy”

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There should be more films made about small-town and rural America. In modern society the cultural gap between town and country has grown smaller and smaller, or at least has the potential to do so. The Internet and modern communications have made it possible for someone living in relative isolation to be as sophisticated and wise, or as unsophisticated and unwise, as someone living in the city.

Nevertheless, cultural and social backwardness persists, and can even deepen under certain circumstances. The intense impoverishment of former industrial areas obviously plays a large role. In any event, there are contradictions and problems here that can produce rich drama in the hands of the right artist. Too often, however, the contemporary artist dismisses the section of America between New York and the West Coast as “flyover country.”

Then there are works that use rural America as mere scaffolding for their murky conceptions.

British-Irish director Martin McDonagh (*In Bruges*, *Seven Psychopaths*) has written and directed *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. It tells the story of Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand), a middle-aged woman, as she fights with local authorities who have not found the killer of her daughter after seven months.

Mildred rents out three abandoned billboards near her house, which read in sequence: “RAPED WHILE DYING,” “AND STILL NO ARRESTS?,” and “HOW COME, CHIEF WILLOUGHBY?”

The local sheriff Bill Willoughby (Woody Harrelson) and his right-hand man, officer Jason Dixon (Sam Rockwell), are understandably upset at the billboards. Willoughby has the sympathy of the town because he is

dying from pancreatic cancer. Dixon is something of the laughing stock of the police force, usually drunk and still living at home with his racist mother.

Mildred’s son Robbie (Lucas Hedges) and her abusive ex-husband Charlie (John Hawkes) are also not supportive of the billboards and wish Mildred would stop. Without revealing too much to the reader, Mildred’s battle with the police and her community will only worsen until she gets satisfaction.

The film’s bleak storyline is supposedly offset by its black humor, which owes a great deal to the Coen brothers’ style of filmmaking. While the Coen brothers (*Fargo*, *O Brother Where Art Thou?*, *The Big Lebowski*) have an uneven filmography to say the least, McDonagh’s film borrows the weakest qualities of their work: a morbid obsession with violence, inappropriate “wisecracks,” and all the rest.

It is never entirely clear what McDonagh is trying to say or even why this film had to be made. The more transparent parts are basically retrograde arguments in favor of vigilantism and “rugged individualism.”

At one point in McDonagh’s work, Sheriff Willoughby confronts Mildred and pleads with her to take down the billboards. He asserts that he has no leads in her daughter’s murder case and asks Mildred what he can do. They have the following exchange:

Mildred: You could pull blood from every man and boy in this town over the age of eight.

Willoughby: There’s civil rights laws prevents that, Mrs. Hayes, and what if he was just passing through town?

Mildred: Pull blood from every man in the country.

Willoughby: And what if he was just passing through the country?

Mildred: If it was me, I'd start up a database, every male baby was born, stick 'em on it, and as soon as he done something wrong, cross reference it, make 100 percent certain it was a correct match, then kill him.

Willoughby: Yeah well, there's definitely civil rights laws that prevents that.

It is never a good sign in a film or novel when a policeman is the defender of civil rights! There may be a few token jabs at the racist police force, but overall the social outlook of *Three Billboards* is decidedly misanthropic and, moreover, its depiction of social life in the American South is conventional and trite.

The plot twists are unlikely and the dialogue feels exaggerated. McDormand's Mildred exhibits only one emotion the entire film. These are not real human beings, but clichés. The no-nonsense mother, the "good old boys" in the police force. Haven't we seen all this before?

McDormand, Harrelson and Rockwell are all fine actors. There are even some genuinely human sequences. Peter Dinklage as James, who Mildred dates in order to have an alibi when the police headquarters is burned down, makes an impression. But these are fleeting moments. The problem here, as is too often the case, is the writing and direction.

McDonagh can paint a picture of an obviously discontented population, bitter at its condition and with good reason. But why the population is so unhappy is never explored and so the drama takes place on the surface of things.

As we noted on the WSWS in 2008, "McDonagh (born 1970) made his name in the mid-1990s as one of the 'In-er-face' playwrights. This trend, according to one of its advocates, represented 'a revolution' in British theater. 'Out went all those boring politically correct plays with tiny casts portraying self-pitying victims; overthrown were all those pale imitations of European directors' theatre; brushed aside were all those shreds of self-regarding physical theatre and long-winded, baggy state-of-the-nation plays.'

"This group of disparate playwrights presented material on stage intended to be shocking and disturbing: murder, rape, torture, suicide, cannibalism, along with massive quantities of social backwardness."

In an interview, McDonagh explained the inspiration for *Three Billboards*: "I saw something similar to what we see on our billboards like 17 years ago. I was on a

bus going through one of the states—I don't even know now which one it was. Somewhere down in the Georgia, Florida, Alabama corner. It was this similarly statement, sort of calling out the police for not solving a crime."

And further on, "The script was written eight years ago, so it's not like a direct response to Trump's America or what's been happening in Missouri over the last couple of years. Those characters and those issues have been around for a long time and will be around for a long time yet."

The political and social sentiments hardly go beyond that. For its emptiness, violence and chilly cleverness, *Three Billboards* has received numerous accolades from the film establishment, winning top prizes at the Toronto Film Festival and recent Golden Globe Awards.

The film, with its story of a vengeful mother standing up to the local "patriarchy," seems to have come along at an opportune, and possibly profitable moment. A comment on IndieWire is headlined, "With Sexual Assault Rattling the Industry, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* Is an Angry Feminist Response."

The article notes that when McDonagh "first conceived of his dark comedy ... he had no idea the movie would come out in an environment rattled by tales of sexual assault by powerful men. Now, McDormand's expletive-spewing avenger epitomizes the angry feminist reckoning leading up to its release. 'I think it's a great film to be put out in this climate,' the 47-year-old British-Irish director said over coffee in New York.

"The topicality was pure coincidence, but McDonagh will take it."

There's not much that needs to be added.



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