

Stillwater—A film about American stereotypes

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Directed by Tom McCarthy; written by McCarthy, Marcus Hinchey, Thomas Bidegain and Noé Debré

Stillwater—which premiered at the Cannes film festival in July and was then released theatrically in the US by Focus Features—is a generally intriguing critique of the attempt to pigeonhole individuals or groups.

Tom McCarthy’s film recounts the story of a father who goes to enormous lengths to free from a foreign prison a daughter whom he believes has been wrongfully convicted of a serious crime. In this effort, hard-bitten Oklahoma oil-rig worker Bill Baker (Matt Damon) travels to Marseille in southern France and navigates a thoroughly unfamiliar environment with all its contradictions and challenges.

Bill’s daughter Allison (Abigail Breslin), who has served five years in jail and faces four more for the murder of her roommate and lover, has come up with what she believes to be an important piece of evidence, the name of an individual who may be responsible for the crime. Her French lawyer refuses to attempt to re-open the case on the grounds that the new information is mere hearsay. Bill lies to Allison about the lawyer’s rebuff and sets out himself, rather recklessly (and, at a certain point, unconvincingly), to find the man named, one Akim (Idir Azougli). In the course of his investigations, he encounters a local woman, Virginie (Camille Cottin), and her young daughter Maya (Lilou Siauvaud), and becomes involved, for better or worse, in their lives.

Rather than being an action movie for the most part, *Stillwater* strives to bring to life the situations and conditions of the people involved across the two continents.

McCarthy has explained that the original inspiration for the movie was the Amanda Knox case. Knox spent almost four years in an Italian prison following her conviction for the 2007 murder of a fellow exchange student with whom she shared an apartment in Perugia.

In 2015, Knox was definitively acquitted by the Italian Supreme Court of Cassation. Although the movie veers sharply away from that story, and centers on fictional figures and fictional events, Knox has objected to McCarthy’s use of her story without consent, at the expense of her reputation.

In any event, McCarthy’s movie treats its characters sensitively and generally examines their flaws with compassion. However, while the movie critiques certain prevailing moods and trends in liberal and “left” circles, in particular the snobbish disdain for working class residents of states like Oklahoma, it does not sufficiently dig into these phenomena.

In the wake of the 2016 election, McCarthy (*The Station Agent*, *The Visitor*, *Win Win*, *Spotlight*) repurposed a movie he had started to make in 2011. *Stillwater* was largely transformed from a thriller into a drama that explores characters and cultures stereotyped in the media and in popular culture, not to mention in American politics, including “backward rednecks,” “socialist France,” etc.

As the movie opens, Baker is cleaning up the wreckage of a house destroyed by a tornado. We also see a couple trying to salvage what they can of their belongings, while two women sit disconsolately in front of what was once a fireplace. Bill has lost his job in the oil industry and has been doing the clean-up work to earn a living. His mother-in-law, Sharon (Deanna Dunagan), asserts early on that he can’t be trusted with simple tasks, and throughout the film the viewer feels for Bill as someone who—in the face of some serious past mistakes—keeps plodding along, persisting when everyone has given up on him.

One of the movie’s central themes seems to be how a person can change—for the better—when placed in a different, more forgiving, cultural setting. Still, there is no happy ending, and the viewer feels the force of the past acting on an individual like Bill, despite the

changed surroundings and his best intentions.

To develop Baker's character, McCarthy and Damon spoke to oil-rig workers in Oklahoma, observed them and tried to understand their condition. In an interview, McCarthy speaks about wanting to "get beyond the expected story points"—which would be a depiction of the roughnecks as not deserving sympathy, as being responsible for their own fate. One commends McCarthy for taking this road, and much of the strength of the movie lies in its depiction of how human beings from sharply different backgrounds can help each other.

Stillwater also criticizes a prevailing view in certain circles—of a pristine, liberal France, with a higher culture, greater social equality and a more sensitive population, in contrast to the American "roughneck." We are introduced to one of Virginie's friends, who is rigid in her preconceptions about Bill and Oklahomans ("Do you own a gun?"), as well as a racist bar owner who refers to Arab teens as "monkeys." We also see the poverty, squalor and gangsterism in the Marseille projects, the "other side" of French life.

Without revealing too much of the narrative, we can simply point out that McCarthy tellingly satirizes local politicians in Oklahoma, in their double-faced duplicity—who know nothing and do nothing, yet go around parroting lying catch-phrases designed to garner votes at the next election, when those—in this case—who know the truth are only a few feet away from them.

The movie tackles fleetingly the level of despair, neglect and brutality that is visited upon rural or semi-rural Oklahoma. At one point, speaking of her father, Allison observes sadly to Virginie that "He's a fuck up. He always has been. I know because I've got it in me too."

Stillwater does not do enough, however, to get beyond the immediate harshness of reality for the Bakers' and Allison's somewhat misanthropic views. The phrase "Life is brutal" is repeated, but the filmmakers do not even hint at the real social and economic roots of this brutality.

Life is not brutal for everyone in Oklahoma, including such notable natives and corporate raiders as billionaires T. Boone Pickens and Henry Roberts Kravis. The state's population has been particularly vulnerable for decades to the ups and downs of the oil industry. After the collapse of the oil economy in the late 1980s, for example, Oklahoma was looted, its

infrastructure systematically dismantled, federal subsidies drastically cut and employees laid off and left to fend for themselves.

All in all, *Stillwater* is not a film made for oil-rig workers. It seems to be essentially an attempt by McCarthy to convince his fellow liberals, following the 2016 election, that not everyone in Oklahoma and other such regions is a racist, Trump-loving reactionary. To say the least, that is a limited aim.

McCarthy recounts a story that reveals more than he perhaps realizes. He refers to a conversation with an oil-rig worker who "didn't dislike Hillary [Clinton] that much, but she told me she was going to shut down oil and fracking, and if she does that, I can't put food on my table." This points to some of the critical economic and class issues, and the inability of the Democratic Party to attract widespread working class support. In fact, the "socialist" Bernie Sanders defeated Clinton by a wide margin in the 2016 Democratic Party primary in Oklahoma. In 2018, tens of thousands of teachers in the state conducted a militant two-week strike, a struggle betrayed in the end by the Oklahoma Education Association and the Oklahoma City-American Federation of Teachers.

Stillwater's final moment is poignant. In Bill's reply to Allison's comment that nothing in their hometown has changed in all those years, he says, "It all looks different to me—I don't hardly recognize it anymore."

The viewer senses that Bill is seeing the same landscape, but with new eyes—something of what he has experienced has made him understand the world better or more deeply. The viewer exits the cinema wishing both father and daughter well.



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