

Palmer: A man just out of prison reenters society

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Directed by Fisher Stevens; written by Cheryl Guerriero

Palmer is directed by veteran actor and award-winning director Fisher Stevens, the maker of film and television documentaries about Occupy Wall Street, Donald Trump, and climate change, among other subjects.

Scripted by Cheryl Guerriero, the movie was digitally released by Apple TV+ in 2021. *Palmer* is a sensitive drama about working class life in contemporary America. Nuanced performances grace this composed and patient film, a relative rarity in present-day cinema.

Rural Louisiana, where people are barely keeping their heads above water, is the setting. The cramped, decayed small-town reality is captured effectively by cinematographer Tobias A. Schliessler.

Former high school star quarterback Eddie Palmer (Justin Timberlake) has just been released from prison after serving 12 years for attempted murder and armed robbery. Good behavior accounts for the shortened jail time. It emerges later in the film that Eddie may have taken the blame in part for the local sheriff's son, a weakling more often than not at the center of trouble.

Eddie moves in with his feisty, church-going grandmother Vivian (92-year-old June Squibb), who is occasionally forced into the role of guardian for eight-year-old Sam (Ryder Allen). The latter's mother Shelly (Juno Temple) has addiction problems that help account for her long absences from the dilapidated trailer she rents from Vivian. Shelly's temporary flights also usually involve abusive boyfriend Jerry (Dean Winters).

For Eddie, the psychological and financial obstacles on the path of "reentering" society are substantial. Finding a job in a narrow-minded town requires groveling before a potential employer, as if being

locked up for more than a decade were insufficient. Miraculously, on the advice of the head of the elementary school's janitorial services, Sibs (Lance E. Nichols), the squeezed-face school principal (J.D. Evermore) takes a chance on the ex-con. Nonetheless, the threat of reincarceration is ever-present and Eddie is under constant scrutiny from many local detractors.

When Vivian dies unexpectedly, not only is Eddie threatened with homelessness, but Sam becomes his full-time charge. As a former star athlete, Eddie finds the penetratingly observant and adorable boy disturbing, particularly because Sam like dolls, make-up and dresses. Eddie's exposing him to football does not alter Sam's preferences. ("You know you're a boy, right?") Sam's attractive teacher Maggie (Alisha Wainwright) enters the picture, the embodiment of kindness and tolerance. Both Eddie, with whom she begins a relationship, and Sam are the beneficiaries.

Eddie protects Sam from youthful bullies and also tears himself away from the town's retrograde barflies. In one scene, Sam, over Eddie's objections, dresses as a princess for Halloween. As classmates begin to taunt him, Maggie appears dressed in male garb. It is an endearing moment.

Sam is *Palmer*'s moral and emotional core. Happiness for Eddie, Sam and Maggie is well-earned, but there are many pitfalls. A scene in which police drag Eddie away for protecting Sam against Shelly and Jerry is emotionally painful, as much for the small boy's loss of his only stable caretaker as for the possibility of a good and honest man once again losing his freedom.

But even the damaged Shelly has her redeeming qualities, allowing Sam his eccentricities while showering him with an imperfect but genuine love.

Palmer takes life seriously. It does not sensationalize,

nor paint the downtrodden population as simply backward. It eschews contrived violence or artificial melodrama as a plot device or diversion. Its focus remains on the fates of its characters, which the filmmakers examine with care.

In an interview, director Stevens asserts that “incarceration is a big problem in America. It is even harder for someone who returns to regular life. That feeling of being perceived as a piece of garbage is something real.”

In addition, the film’s strength is that it does not see oppression as simply producing vile personal relationships and even savagery, the norm in many movies today. Even people in straitened, harsh conditions can act with a certain nobility and humanity. This is not a small matter.

On the other hand, *Palmer*’s weakness, and it shares this with virtually every other American socially realistic film at present, is its passivity and essential acceptance of what exists. The filmmakers see in deprivation nothing but deprivation, instead of a disruptive, destructive force that leads inevitably to upheaval. Economic hardship is treated as a problem to be overcome or endured on an entirely individual basis, with a degree of resignation.

Nonetheless, *Palmer* exudes an innocence and charm that engage the audience’s sympathy for its characters and their dilemmas.



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