



Monday, December 9, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Rory O'Connor | The Film Stage | Rated PG-13 | 106 mins.

Writing on Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* in 2010, Anthony Lane whipped a quote from Umberto Eco: "Two clichés make us laugh but a hundred clichés move us, because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion." Eco's words resonate even stronger in *Christmas Eve in Miller's Point*, a fascinating simulacrum of festive movies in which references to annual favorites are thrust together with about as much delicacy as the family it tenderly depicts. The island isn't *Shutter* but *Long*, specifically a small town in Suffolk County where we meet four generations of the Bolsanos, a blue-collar family going through the motions and rituals of their annual get-together, adoring and enduring each other as best they can in what might be their last year in the family home. The filmmaker behind this delicate, strange, reflective bauble is Tyler Taormina, co-founder of the Omnes film collective with Carson Lund, the cinematographer on each of his films to date; and over those three projects (*Miller's* was preceded by *Happer's Comet* and *Ham on Rye*) there is already the suggestion of a distinct, novel style: imagine a slightly jagged *New Sincerity* lensed by Russell Metty and you're somewhere in the area.

The setting and production design are so rich with authenticity and detail that fans of *The Bear* might be tempted to draw comparisons with a famous episode in season two, but *Miller's Point's* motley crew can boast their own joyful mess of idiosyncrasies. All of the holiday staples are served up here: the tough guy brothers-in-law, the wily matriarch, the mildly problematic uncle, the stropy teens itching to escape, and the younger kids who have yet to rebel against their sparkly dresses and dickie bows. There's a gift-giving ceremony, a screening of VHS home movies, a family walk, and a slightly inebriated after-dinner speech. Taormina collects these moments less like plot points in a conventional narrative than flashes of his own memory, micro-recollections jumbled with all the unruly charm of a photo album.

We are introduced to proceedings through a typically mild-mannered in-law (Ben Schenkman) but the film's opening half is shared by the collective. Later, after the teenagers make a break for it, driving to a bagel shop where the local youths congregate—and where freegan dumpster divers might be causing the proprietor to have an aneurysm—Taormina slightly narrows his focus: mainly to Emily (a wonderful Matilda Fleming) and Michelle (Francesca Scorsese, of

Martin and TikTok fame), who has a crush on one of the bagel shop's employees (played by Eighth Grade's Elsie Fisher)—though, like most storylines in the film, it is merely one strand in the tapestry.

Explaining the Taormina vibe isn't easy. The simplest inroad might be to listen to the way his characters converse: so unguarded and un-movielike as to give the sense of eavesdropping. "I wish everyone could have friends like us," one of the younger people says, sharing a feeling many might recall from a time when the world felt smaller. In looking at such vulnerable moments from a critical distance that still allows for an enormous amount of nostalgia, Taormina achieves a singular tone. Crucially, the director isn't looking to mock this naivety; if anything the film envies it, even ennobles it. Every now and then the director checks in with two local cops, one played by Michael Cera (who also produced) and the other by Gregg Turkington. The *On Cinema* icon's presence might put some viewers on the lookout for an elaborate joke, but it proves to be a cunning false flag. (He provides some comic relief, but it's comedy of which Beckett might approve.) Something similar could be said for the inclusion of Francesca Scorsese and Sawyer Spielberg (the latter appears as a grungy stoner named Splint), which looked like stunt casting but plays like an inspired meta flourish—another interesting shade to this film's milieu of family ties and cinema history.

The grainy, Sean Price Williams era of East Coast independent filmmaking is notably absent here. *Miller's Point* instead seems to draw from a glossier age: '80s Hollywood, perhaps, or something older still. There are of course plenty winks to Christmas classics (a cardboard cutout on a rumba like the Jordan in *Home Alone* is perhaps most obvious) but the most interesting ones appear almost subconsciously—when Emily dons a Santa hat, elfin face and dark bangs peaking out, are we not to think of Rooney Mara in *Carol*? In many ways, it is Emily who walks away with the film, and it's with her that Taormina lingers as we wander to a car park late on and to a gorgeous sequence of young people pairing up; Lund's camera follows their hands in close-up as blankets of snow fall around them. It is an aching, ineffably cinematic close to a film that speaks to the medium's past and may point to some small part of its future.

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TIVOLI THEATRE

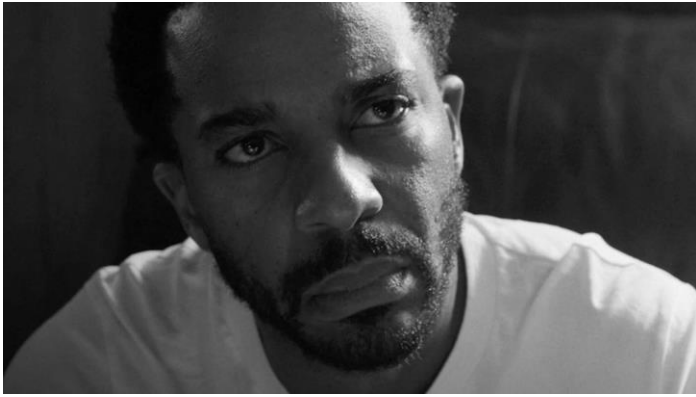
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EXHIBITING FORGIVENESS

Monday, January 13, 7:30 pm

Reviewed William Bibbiani | TheWrap | Rated R | 117 Mins.

Celebrated painter Titus Kaphar lays down a gauntlet pretty early in his writing and directing debut, "Exhibiting Forgiveness," which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival Saturday. André Holland plays Tarrell Rodin, a celebrated artist whose work looks just like Titus Kaphar's (because Kaphar provided the paintings). He dismisses a recent critical rave because, positivity be damned, the critic didn't understand what they were talking about. To Tarrell, it doesn't matter what a critic likes if they don't like it the right way.



"Exhibiting Forgiveness" is an impressive first feature, boldly conceived and emotionally fraught, with masterful performances and powerful works of art woven into the narrative. It's a film that confronts the multigenerational impact of addiction and abuse, and the way art can be personally transformative and therapeutic, even though the artist may struggle to communicate directly with those around them. If I'm "wrong" about that, I'm sorry, but that's still a powerful takeaway.

Rodin lives in a big house with his wife, Aisha (Andra Day, "The United States vs. Billie Holiday") and their son, Jermaine (Daniel Berrier). It's been a rough time for Tarrell, waking up in the middle of the night in mid-panic attack, trying to work out his feelings in the studio he shares with Aisha, a talented singer-songwriter. Despite their different disciplines they have a way to collaborate: Aisha sings a new song and Tarrell suggests adding the color yellow, which Aisha — and cinematographer Lachlan Milne ("Minari") — divinely provides.

Tarrell has been trying to get his mother, Joyce (Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor), to move out of her old house and in with his family, but when

they arrive she hasn't packed. She's also brought Tarrell's estranged father, La'Ron (John Earl Jelks, "New Amsterdam") back into the Tarrell's life against his will. Tarrell and his mother were both abused by La'Ron, a former crack addict. Tarrell had every intention of introducing his father to Aisha for the first time at La'Ron's funeral.

The message that "Exhibiting Forgiveness" iterates, over and over again, is that if you can't forgive someone else you cannot be forgiven. And, frankly, Tarrell can be forgiven for rejecting that. La'Ron may be eager to reconnect, and even willing to explain how he became the disappointment he is, but he never explicitly asks for forgiveness. It's only expected that Tarrell provide it, despite all the suffering La'Ron has caused. Joyce seems to have forgiven him, many times over, after many shocking betrayals. She has a light in her that Tarrell cannot understand, let alone find in himself.

And what, exactly, does Tarrell need to be forgiven for anyway? To hear Titus Kaphar's film tell it, his understandable failure to forgive is a character flaw in itself. Or, at least, it's an infected wound that desperately needs lancing. Holland dives head first into a role of such unusual depth and complexity it's almost hard to process "Exhibiting Forgiveness" on a performance level. Holland, Jelks, and Ellis-Taylor are operating on astounding levels, in material that challenges and rewards, even if it cannot possibly satisfy.

Kaphar's paintings aren't a backdrop, and even when they are, they're literally pushed into frame by the ghost of Tarrell's past. In lieu of some perhaps much-needed therapy, Tarrell communicates with and through his artwork. Perhaps that's why he's so offended when people don't "get" it, critics or buyers alike. He's putting everything into those paintings. To misunderstand his work is to deny his feelings, his thoughts, his reality. He can't even feel nostalgia; when he visits a public swimming pool from his childhood, now empty and grown over, all he sees are the chips of paint that adorn it.

"Exhibiting Forgiveness" defies certain structural conventions, interrupting narrative flows for extended dramatic moments, just like the unexpected re-introduction of La'Ron has disrupted a life Tarrell's spent trying to move forward. Looking back is hard, it's disruptive, it takes time. In those scenes Ellis-Taylor and Jelks provide majestic parallels to Holland's haunted, even frightened performance. Tarrell cannot fathom coming to terms with the past they share. It disturbs him to even consider it.

Kaphar brings something special, narratively raw, but thematically refined to his first feature. It's painful and it doesn't necessarily heal, but it's a full experience, exceptional in its craft, with performances that cannot be dismissed or be forgotten.

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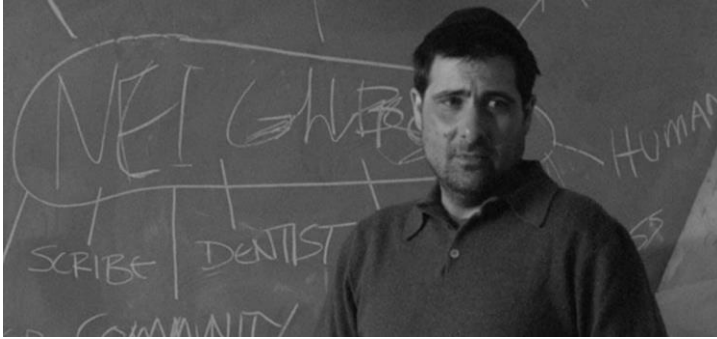
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Between the Temples

Monday, January 27, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Jourdain Searles | The Hollywood Reporter | Rated R | 111 Mins.

In a grimy, awkward world that painfully resembles our own, Ben Gottlieb (Jason Schwartzman) isn't coping very well. His wife passed away and he's living back at home with his two overbearing mothers in upstate New York, isolated from the energy of the city. He's a cantor at the local temple, but he can't sing anymore. While he keeps kosher and remains devout, Ben struggles to feel the same connection to his faith that he once had. Ben isn't really connecting to anything these days, not even his own body. He's schlubby, unshaven with blemishes on his face, plodding through life in a depressed daze. It's like he's completely given up. In one early scene, he lays out in the middle of the road beckoning for a truck to run him over.



Then he has a chance encounter with his childhood music teacher, Carla Kessler (Carol Kane), at a bar and her presence is like a shock to the system. She's honest, speaks her mind and has a lust for life that rivals women half her age. Soon, she becomes Ben's unlikely bat mitzvah student and friend, and Ben becomes determined to spend as much time as possible teaching her.

But it's not just about giving Carla the bat mitzvah she always wanted: Ben is smitten with her. Together they're an odd couple with a connection that confounds everyone around them. But that's what makes it beautiful: It's refreshing and unexpected. Carla challenges Ben to be present, teaching him to be a more active listener. And Ben teaches Carla all about Judaism, slowly reigniting his faith.

Things get complicated when the rabbi (Robert Smigel) introduces Ben to his daughter, Gabby (Madeline Weinstein), with the hope of a love connection. His pushy realtor mother, Judith (Dolly De Leon), encourages the setup, inviting her over and pressuring Ben to spend time with her. His other mother, Meira (Caroline Aaron), doesn't apply as much pressure, but she clearly wants Ben to give love another try. And what could be a better match than the rabbi's daughter? She's pretty and young — resembling his dead wife, Ruth — but that's not what Ben wants anymore. Ruth was a sexy, confident novelist with an erotic mind and a drinking problem. He only mentions this in passing, as if the love they had died with her. What's left is a childlike man, hoping for a different — perhaps more gentle — kind of love with Carla.

But she's old enough to be his mother, and she already has a son of her own (Matthew Shear), who doesn't approve of their tender-yet-chaste relationship. And he's not the only one who finds their

connection strange. Their relationship has echoes of Hal Ashby's Harold and Maude, with Kane stepping effortlessly into the Ruth Gordon role. It's lovely to see Kane front and center on the big screen again, flexing her legendary comedy chops. There's a certain ethereal energy to her presence — she's charming, confounding and hilarious with a unique voice.

Between the Temples could be read as a thematic companion to *Beau Is Afraid*, examining the relationship between Jewish mothers and their sons as well as the masculine self-loathing that's been the cornerstone of Jewish comedy and film. Ben is just as afraid as Beau — afraid of letting his mothers down, afraid of not being a good enough Jew and, most pointedly, afraid that love and happiness isn't a real option for him. Carla is his lifeline: part mother figure, part lover, and an attentive student. In an emotionally chaotic world, the two ground each other.

Schwartzman has been a lead before, but never quite like this. Here, he's like a Jewish Steve Carell, throwing his body fully into the comedy with no social graces. Ben is an awkward man who can't help but be the center of attention, unable to mask any of his emotions. It's a far cry from Schwartzman's more well-groomed, petulantly handsome, artsy characters in Wes Anderson films. In one memorable scene, Ben watches a video from his own bar mitzvah and hallucinates an interaction with his young self. The beautiful weirdness of that scene transforms the film and his performance into something deeply, gorgeously strange.

Between the Temples has director Nathan Silver (*Thirst Street*) in a different mode. Maintaining his acidic sense of humor, he's penned a screenplay that is surprisingly optimistic. This is a world where embarrassment waits around every corner and everyone is talking over each other. But in the scenes with just Schwartzman and Kane, there's a sweetness that feels new. Unlike his previous film, *Stinking Heaven*, *Between the Temples* is a story that believes in a utopia, even if it's just two people enjoying each other's company. Where the story lands is surprisingly poignant, cementing Ben and Carla's faith in Judaism and each other.



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2024 Anim8 Virtual Student Film Festival

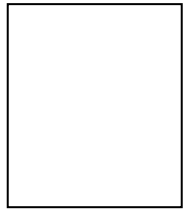
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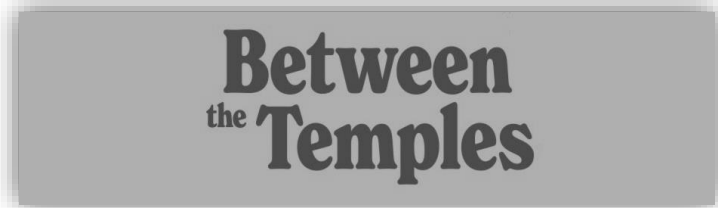
"In Christmas Eve in Miller's Point, cinema and family beautifully come together."

—*The Film Stage*

Monday, December 9 at 7:30 pm

"An emotionally exhilarating debut by Titus Kaphar."
—*Vanity Fair*

Monday, January 13 at 7:30 pm



"A spiky hilarious and thoroughly unorthodox screwball comedy."

—*Indiewire*

Monday, January 27 at 7:30 pm

The After Hours Film Society is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council.