

## *Modest antiwar movie carries a real impact*

*Written by James C. Strouse*

*Directed by James C. Strouse*

John Cusack ... Stanley Phillipps

Shélan O'Keefe ... Heidi Phillipps

Gracie Bednarczyk ... Dawn Phillipps

Alessandro Nivola ... John Phillipps

*John Phillipps: "How do these girls feel about the fact that their mother is halfway across the world fighting in an unjust oil war?"*

*Stanley Phillipps: (paraphrasing) "They feel good that she's over there protecting your sorry ungrateful, pinko ass."*

This little gem—nominated for two Golden Globes and winner of a few indie awards—has to be taken on its own terms; it's basically a character study, with John Cusack giving a terrific performance outside his normal envelope. Writer/director James Strouse's gimmick of turning the gender tables on the customary war-dead and war-bereaved produces a unique perspective most of us never consider: namely, it's the wife who is killed in the Iraq war/occupation, not the husband. Then the story is about how the husband Stanley Phillipps (John Cusack) comes to terms with that loss, with the incomprehensible, inescapable fact that "Grace is gone"... and how he tells the daughters he loves so much.

Stanley is basically Middle American Man—living in Minnesota, working at a Home Depot surrogate at a lower-management level, high school graduate—who, as many such individuals, believes in his country and its leaders, at least to the extent of believing these leaders when they claim that invading the Middle East is an act of defending America. He signs up for the Marines, meets his wife there, but whereas she is shipped off to join the occupation forces, he is mustered out of the service for bad eyes. He becomes the Mr. Mom, staying home and taking care of the girls; in fact, he's a member of a support group of military spouses the rest of whom are women (which is the basis for one of the more gently humorous scenes in the movie).

One day the word arrives, two uniformed officers come to the door with the sad fact, and it's a crusher. (I don't think you can consider it a spoiler to note that the title of the movie is supposed to be interpreted literally.) Grace has been killed in Iraq. The officers provide to Stanley additional gestures of support, including the chaplain's availability for commiserating with Stanley and the girls, etc. All of which has a hollow, almost sadistic, banality to it. Approaching the movie analytically, the antiwar person in me is screaming at the rotten system that enables such pointless deaths to occur. Then I think, "Wait a minute, this isn't that kind of movie."

What it's about is the meaning/impact of a military death—irrespective of the causal framework or the justness of the cause—to the ones left behind (and by inference, what is the meaning/impact of any casualty of war on those who remain to suffer the loss). This fascinatingly simple movie is about the deep psychological, emotional reality of the loss and the suffering of war. It should be mandatory viewing for any political executive who commits troops to war and to bloody unending occupation. Interestingly, the topic of such leaders having no sensitivity to the pain of others has come up recently in conversation with others.

This is from a recent Beaniegram VIP note[1]:

From Correspondent Dave today I receive an essay by E.L. Doctorow, which I located online here. I mentioned to Dave that I'd been peripherally aware of Bush's general insensitivity to anyone else's misfortunes, especially those he's caused. But I hadn't had it so fully articulated until I'd seen Vincent Bugliosi's observations in his book, *The Prosecution of George W. Bush for Murder*. In that book, it becomes clear that Bush is absolutely devoid of what most of us would regard as normal consideration for other human beings' pain and suffering.

It's beginning to appear that Dubya has a "borderline personality disorder," i.e. "evil genes," according to a book of the same name—I'll be reviewing Professor Barbara Oakley's *Evil Genes: How Rome Fell, Hitler*

Rose, Enron Failed, and My Sister Stole my Mother's Boyfriend within a few weeks--to say the least. Whether it's genetic or not, there's a real possibility the little guy will face the death penalty for his leadership of a conspiracy that resulted in the wrongful killings of 4700+ Americans through the wars the conspiracy lied us into. Though I do believe most people would accept a South-African Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission, rather than insist on absolute justice for everyone who made the 911/Iraq/Afghanistan killing fields possible.

Well, enough about Bush (whom Stanley's brother John (Alessandro Nivola) refers to as Monkey Man) and enough about the evils of war. In *Grace*, the grieving one(s) are ordinary middle/(muddle?) Americans that most of us know so many of. Stanley is a regular guy who has to deal with the ultimate trauma, death of a young loved one, and frankly he's not doing so well. When he gets the word, he starts to sit down with his daughters 12-year-old Heidi (Shélan O'Keefe) and 8-year-old Dawn (Gracie Bednarczyk) to have the long talk. But he just can't bring it off. Instead he bundles them off on a multiday trip to a Florida theme park that the girls have always wanted to visit, thinking he'll figure out a better time and place to break the awful news.

It's a good performance for the girls, too, especially the precocious and journalistically aware Heidi who figures out fairly quickly that something is wrong. Watching her come to the realization that her father's erratic behavior may have something to say about her mother is a character study of its own. And it makes the eventual resolution of the plot—when the truth finally comes out—even more powerful. Again without giving anything specific away, the ultimate scene is absolutely gripping emotionally and worth the price of admission.

One critic, Scott Foundas in the *Village Voice*, finds the movie deviously oversentimental: "Like this season's other drama about a family coping with the death of an Iraq enlistee, Paul Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah*, *Grace Is Gone* wants to massage liberal sensibilities about the war without alienating the church-going, Wal-Mart-shopping Middle Americans who might see, in Stanley Phillips, a reflection of themselves." But I don't think that's the case at all. Instead, being purely naturalistic, the movie gives us an almost literal understanding of the emotional costs of real people experiencing the death and destruction of war.

This reference to feelings about the war was the subject of my guest column this week, where two peace-loving friends of mine shared their deepest anguish over the real people whose lives, minds, and bodies are being destroyed by war. Too often, we look at a cipher on the TV screen and think casualties are electronic phenomena. *Grace* is a film that helps to flesh out the harsh reality.

*As a bonus, Clint Eastwood composes the score for the movie, and it's the perfect understated complement to the simplicity of the message.*

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[1] My VIP notes are simply shorter email message-columns that refer to affairs of the day. To receive my notes, please contact me at this email address.

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*Grace is Gone* | *John Cusack* | *Clint Eastwood* | *Antiwar* | *War Casualties*