

ENTERTAINMENT

Days seem like years in story of death in the pea patch

Stone Boy out in the cold

Stone Boy
The Princess Theatre
September 14-20

review by John Charles

The *Stone Boy* is about repressed feelings, but the movie itself is just as repressed as its characters.

Chris Cain's film, which made its Edmonton premiere Friday at the Princess, withholds as much of the story as it tells us. So the emotional impact you're finally left with is based on your own instinctive reading of the characters' feelings as much as it's indebted to these filmmakers' art.

Arnold, a 12-year-old Montana farm boy (Jason Presson), accidentally shoots and kills his older brother Eugene, in the film's opening moments. We see just how it happens, and we appreciate the boy's silent bewilderment, and the numb way he remains in the fields picking peas for several hours, as he and Eugene started out to do.

"How come you didn't run home?" is the sheriff's blunt question the next day. And Arnold can only say that the peas would go bad if they were picked when the sun was fully up. It sounds like a dumb answer to the sheriff, but we know that a bit of agricultural wisdom was the last thing Eugene said to Arnold before the gun went off.

That's one of the last things we do know for sure in this austere, frustrating movie.

The next few days — the funeral, the relatives reminiscing about Eugene — are shown in brief glimpses, and we don't know if the family is deliberately ignoring Arnold, but we don't see anyone talking to him. When fond recollections of Eugene begin, Arnold goes to stand with his granddad George (Wilford Brimley), as though he feels faint accusations from the other.

"He doesn't know what he did," says Joe's father (Robert Duvall) to his wife, Ruth (Glenn Close) that night. And we realize that everyone finds Arnold's lack of apologies, or tears — or anything — unacceptable. So the film is set up as a waiting game. Does Arnold realize what he's done? What circumstances must occur so he can finally break open, like a dried husk, and grieve?

"There's no such thing as time when it comes to sorrow," says Andy (Frederic Forrest), Ruth's brother. "Days are years and years are days." That's the message of the film, but it seems ironic, since we don't see anyone really expressing their sorrow — or any other emotion — unless they're out of control.

Andy's wife Lu (Gail Youngs, who is Duvall's real-life girlfriend) suspects him of sleeping around, and she has a big, hysterical scene which is watched by her colleagues with worry and distaste. The audience, however, watches with a certain pleasure that someone's finally emoting up there on the screen.

The *Stone Boy* is probably the most visually chaste movie you'll see all year, as Juan Ruiz-Anchia's photography is beautiful and severely classical. There's no camera movement within the scenes, and long shots are used — not close-ups, so we see the characters and their setting in the same frame. This style is much closer to such Japanese master directors as Ozu (*Tokyo Story*) than it is to anything from Hollywood in the last decade.

A repeated crane shot of Joe's house at night emphasizes the family's isolation, and the shots of the rugged landscape or bales of hay are functional, not decorative. The color is muted as well, and even a Reno casino looks low-keyed, instead of excitingly glitzy.

When we're shown a close-up it's to let us know a single tear has formed in Ruth's eye.

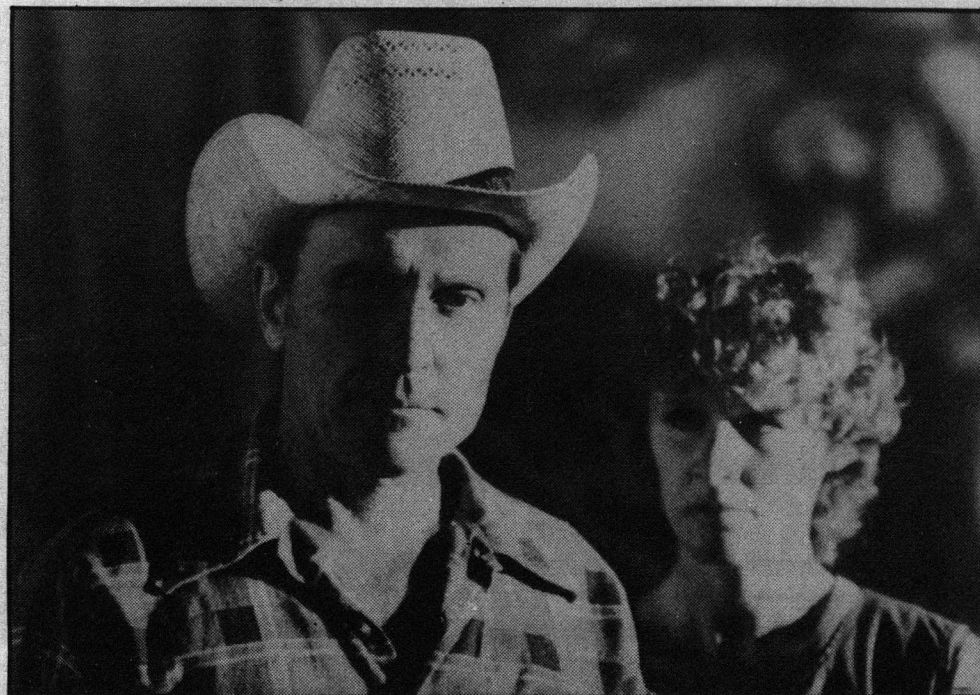
The kind of close-up which TV-oriented directors often employ — with forehead and chin cut away so we're confronted with a grotesquely enlarged hunk of face — is not in evidence here.

But this austerity, combined with Gina Barriault's laconic script, sometimes seems self-conscious. It's as if these artists believe that by avoiding the traditional devices of drama — illuminating dialogue, a way of revealing what's going through Arnold's mind (which a novel could convey) — a purer, more truthful story will automatically result. But that's only the case if you've found an equivalent way of conveying those things.

The acting is uniformly excellent. Duvall doesn't seem to do much, but what's there is dead-on. Give him two simple lines, such as: "You don't know what I'm feeling. You just — don't know," and his stoic suffering fills the theatre like a scream.

Perhaps more skillful direction would have brought a greater range of expression from Presson, thus making the movie really powerful instead of just sad.

The *Stone Boy* is worth seeing, simply as a reminder of how much drama there can be in silence. Disco music and steamy sex scenes are not the answer to movie success. But then neither is good taste.



Robert Duvall and Glenn Close, the parents in *Stone Boy*

Plenty of Skeletons in this closet

Angel of Death
Theatre Network

review by Brenda Brochu

Earl Birney once wrote of us Canadians that "it's only by our lack of ghosts that we are haunted," but times have changed.

One need only have attended *Angel of Death* at Theatre Network Friday night to see the change. Edmonton playwright Raymond Storey dragged some formidable skeletons out of the closet and set them tooth-chatteringly rattling.

The play is set in Canada during WWI, and centers around a relatively prosperous family, the MaCauleys. The family has a skeleton they would rather keep securely locked away in the closet: it seems Alice, the attractive young stenographer, fell in love with Jamie, a first cousin who is now off fighting for King and Empire.

The War seems to oblige the MaCauleys by disposing of Jamie on the battlefield, but that isn't the end of it. The house is soon filled with strange voices and mysterious bangs and crashes. All of this is reminiscent of another death — Alice's mother heard

voices and went quietly insane before being taken by the Angel of Death.

Audience reaction left no doubt as to the gripping appeal of this macabre thriller. By the beginning of the second act, viewers were perched tensely on the edges of their seats. One of the reasons was a superb performance by Judith Haynes as the determined but vulnerable young Alice, struggling against her father's strict authoritarianism.

Wendell Smith's staccato voice and restrained mannerisms struck just the right note as the father.

Barbara Resse, playing the superstitious housekeeper Norma, was a little stilted in her crucial opening speech, but as her manner softened, her natural accent added suspense

and humour as the play developed. Robert Winslow played one of those affable but awkward supporting characters who mean well but seem to have two left feet. Christopher Young, as Jamie, had trouble controlling the pitch of his voice, but generally came across as a convincing young war hero.

The first act of *Angel of Death* is a little uneven, with two climaxes of equal intensity. The overall story, though, is sound, and the inevitable ending (which somehow manages to catch us by surprise) provides a fitting conclusion.

Daniel Van Heyst designed a historically accurate and very attractive set.

Angel of Death continues at Theatre Network through September 30.

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A domestic scene from *Angel of Death*

Photo Dan Watson