

Two sincere depression epics

Bay Boy
Pan Canadian

Places in the Heart
Columbia Pictures

reviews by Gilbert Bouchard

For a screenplay, sincerity is the kiss of death.

The last thing anyone wants to see on the theatre screen is an author's personal blubberings. Sincerity often becomes self-indulgent, and the personal often transforms itself on the screen into the obscure.

The Bay Boy and *Places in the Heart* are both sincere movies. Fortunately they're also exceptions to the rule.

Sincerity isn't the only common denominator between these movies. Both are set in the late 30's and depict the lives of two families torn apart by death and poverty.

The Bay Boy is based on director/author, Daniel Petrie's childhood experiences in depression-bound Grace Bay, a small mining town in Nova Scotia.

These experiences included the cold-blooded murder of a local couple by a member of Grace Bay's police force in 1941.

Although Petrie didn't witness the murder himself, it haunted him. It haunted him enough to come back to the town he worked so hard to escape from, to film a movie about that very same murder and the havoc it played.

The Bay Boy is the story of Donald Campbell (Donald Sutherland's son Kiefer) a normal, over-hormoned sixteen-year-old trying to keep his sanity while biding his time before he leaves Grace Bay - "the armpit of the world."

Donald is attracted to local beauty Saxon Coldwell (Gordon Pinsent's daughter Leah) who lives across the street with her tyrannical father police sergeant Tom Coldwell (Alan Scarfe).

The senior Coldwell, soured by the death of his wife, keeps a strict and relentless eye on his daughters and teeters on the verge of a complete breakdown. He finally does succumb to his brutish temper, and guns down an elderly Jewish couple.

But, unbeknownst to Coldwell, there's a witness to his crime, none other than Donald. This is when the complications set in.

Lust, fear, devotion and confusion are given equal reign in young Donald's life.



Sally Field (centre) looks out over a cotton field she must harvest with the help of itinerant worker Danny Glover, and her two children, Yankton Hatten (left) and Gennie James in *Places in the Heart*.

Lust drags him towards the beautiful Leah, but fear propels him from her murderous father and binds him in a self-imposed vow of silence: he dares not divulge to anyone the terrible crime he has witnessed.

Devotion to the Catholic Church and to his parents complicates Donald's dilemma.

Donald has to come to grips with his guilt over not being able to relieve more of his parents' burdens. His father (Peter Donat) is trying to maintain the remnants of his bankrupt soda pop business, while his mother (Liv Ullman) bakes to supplement the family's meager income.

His guilt is compounded when Donald can't bring himself to tell his mother that he has strong second doubts on his entering the priesthood.

Catholicism and its resulting guilt are certainly two of the bigger obsessions in this movie. Petrie's Catholic Church is large, solid and unresponsive to the people of Grace Bay.

Donald's mother, for example, has already lost a daughter who drowned several years before the start of the story, but instead of finding solace through her religion, she is tormented by dreams of her little girl in purgatory.

And when Donald tries to turn to Father McKinnon (Thomas Peacocke) in the confessional to relieve himself of his awful secret, perhaps get some advice at how to handle the situation, he finds that the priest is more interested in Donald's masturbation than in his more pressing problem.

In fact, it gets worse. Petrie's attack on the Catholic Church dips into the unreasonable. Donald is turned away from the priesthood after he is mollsted by a French-Canadian homosexual priest.

What is a viewer supposed to make of this tidbit? Are all priests homosexual? Or is it just the French ones?

There are many varied reasons why a boy wouldn't want to go into the priesthood, and

chances are the percentages of homosexual Catholic priests are no higher than in any other profession and priests by the same token are no more likely to go around molesting young boys.

But this was a small and insignificant complaint when you consider the rest of the movie.

Unlike American teen exploitation movies, *The Bay Boy* is sensitive to teenage anguish, and sympathetic to the full spectrum of adolescent development.

While Petrie was travelling back to the "armpit of the world", another director/author was travelling back to his roots: Robert Benton to Waxahachie, Texas.

Benton's family goes back four generations in Waxahachie - back as far as the Civil War.

But as a young man, Benton wasn't too thrilled about his old home town. All Benton could think about was his ultimate escape to the wild and artistic world outside rural Texas. When he finally did escape, it was to New York, where his work as an artist eventually led him to *Esquire* magazine, as their art director.

But the pull back to his roots was irresistible. His first screenplay was *Bonnie and Clyde*, a sympathetic look at the legendary characters who lived at the time of his childhood.

He was drawn full circle last year when he revisited his home town with his wife and son and decided to incorporate the people and stories from his childhood into a movie.

Benton took his greatgrandfather, who had been the sheriff of Waxahachie before he was shot by a drunken black man, a widowed greatgrandmother who kept her family and farm together, a black transient who helped his greatgrandmother pull it off, not to mention the blind great uncle who made his living caning chairs and making brooms, and created *Places in the Heart*.

Places in the Heart is one of the better movies I've seen in the past several years. It's a biting sensitive movie with both feet on the ground. It is uplifting and positive, while depicting life in an unadorned and realistic light.

The acting is above reproach, and the production values are skyhigh.

This is one of those movies where even trying to review it is to belittle it. I couldn't even start to talk about this movie without taking up a good part of this newspaper. This movie is Oscar material.

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