

Without a Trace: A tragic timeliness

Kate Nelligan soars as stubborn, heroic mother

PAUL PIVATO
Watching *Without A Trace*, one can't help being reminded of the recent disappearance and murder of Sharin Keenan. Her horrible death accents the fear, anxiety and emotional trauma on which the film focuses. But *Without A Trace* is not a documentary on missing children; it dramatizes how people try to cope with sudden tragedy and how hope, faith and courage are put to a test. As such, *Without A Trace* is a success. The film stars Canadian Kate Nelligan as Susan Selky, a single mother and professor of English at

Columbia University. She returns home one day to find her son Alex missing. Tension mounts as the drama rapidly unfolds. Detective Al Menetti (Judd Hirsch of *Taxi* fame) arrives at Susan's home and, within hours, a full-scale investigation is under way. Susan is almost suffocated by insensitive TV reporters and police, yet she refuses to break down. Instead, she is buoyed by hope and her gritty spirit. Nelligan's Susan Selky is the very heart of the movie; the other characters all revolve around her and are tested by her faith and determin-



Canadian actress Kate Nelligan: hope and a gritty spirit

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ation. David Duke plays Graham, her estranged husband, and Stockard Channing appears as one of Susan's good friends. When the burden of Alex's disappearance becomes too great, both husband and friend shrink from the tragedy, but Susan grows stronger. The media and the community eventually lose interest, but detective Menetti, 'the friendly neighbourhood cop', is spurred on by Susan's unflagging faith.

Nelligan plays Susan Selky with sensitivity and skill. The audience can empathize with and believe in her. Susan's qualities of intelligence, courage and strength, brought out and developed by Nelligan, are rarely portrayed in women on celluloid. Nelligan's Susan is one of the strongest heroines in years, yet she never becomes larger-than-life.

Without A Trace marks the directorial debut of Stanley Jaffe, who produced *Goodbye Columbus* and the Academy Award winning *Kramer v.s. Kramer*. The screenplay, by Beth Gutcheon, is adapted from her novel *Still Missing*. At emotionally powerful moments in the film words are unnecessary. Instead, the viewer is allowed to see the pain and joy felt by the characters.

Without A Trace is much more than a suspense story. Director Jaffe prefers to train the audience's attention on the development of the characters. While the narrative moves slowly at times, the plot takes sudden unexpected turns, preventing the story from sinking into a torpor.

The real drama is to be found in the strained relations created by the crisis and in the manner each

character deals with the crisis. In one chilling scene, Susan is forced to take a lie detector test and is pushed to extremes of fortitude by a ruthless examiner. (To its credit, *Without A Trace* avoids cliched situations; there are no heated romances during the investigation.)

Unfortunately, the film is marred by the odious music of Jack Nitzsche. Maudlin trumpets blare rudely at the audience undermining emotion-laden scenes with unnecessary cues to smile or shed a tear as in some trashy melodramas.

Without A Trace is a touching film peopled with real and endearing characters. The movie never degenerates into a sickly sweet sob story, nor does it stray from the bounds of conventional Hollywood drama within which the film works, remaining uncomplicated and unpretentious.



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