

Review: 'Coffee & Kareem' is an offensively tactless comedy

The buddy-cop movie launched Friday on Netflix

By John Battiston, jbattiston@loudountimes.com

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Terrence Little Gardenhigh, left, and Ed Helms star in "Coffee & Kareem" on Netflix.

Courtesy Photo/Netflix

We were warned. With promotional posters shamelessly mirroring those of classic cop movies like "48 Hrs." and "Beverly Hills Cop," Netflix threw up red flags aplenty indicating just how big a genre travesty its new film, "Coffee & Kareem," would be. If you make the unfortunate error of pressing play on the new Ed Helms vehicle, you will find it is much more than just the wanton rip-off we were promised — it is one of the most distasteful mainstream movies released in some time.

Helms plays James Coffee, a laughably incompetent Detroit cop who finds himself in the crosshairs of 12-year-old Kareem, his new girlfriend's son. Kareem (Terrence Little Gardenhigh in his feature debut) fancies himself a stone-cold gangster, spewing obscenities left and right and earning detention after performing a vulgar rap in English class. Hoping to prove his street-hardened mettle and to rescue his mom, Vanessa (Taraji P. Henson), from dating a "pig," he arranges to have one of Detroit's most notorious criminals rough Coffee up and scare him off for good.

Things, of course, don't go quite according to plan, and Coffee and Kareem become the unlikeliest of teams in attempting to expose a pernicious, police-protected drug operation, all while evading the wrath of Detroit's seediest miscreants. Thus ensues an endless barrage of aggressively unfunny gags that tactlessly make light of race relations, police brutality, child sexual assault, abortion, homosexuality and

a smattering of other subjects, apparently with the mere goal of being risqué. Mix this with a half-dozen moments copy-pasted from movies like "Die Hard" and "Point Break," and you've got what might already be the year's most offensive movie, in every sense of the word.

Apologists for "Coffee & Kareem" may argue its sense of humor, particularly involving racial stereotypes, attempts to address and wrestle with weighty material while keeping the film accessible and amusing. But first-time screenwriter Shane Mack's dialogue and characterization are so surface-level, so reliant on stereotyping even the main protagonists, that no intelligent viewer will gather anything positive from them.

Perhaps most infuriating are remarks by black characters who lament Vanessa's decision to date a white man "who doesn't have money," or when Coffee repeatedly insists he isn't racist because "my girlfriend is black." It's these little moments that not only make our leads completely unlikeable, but hamstringing any supposed attempt to level the playing field between characters of different backgrounds and nationalities. When the titular duo inevitably end up appreciating each other despite their differences, it's maddeningly unearned.

Among a few redeeming factors are Michael Dowse's passable direction, though the handful of people who saw his film "Stuber" last year will find he's largely pulling from the same bag of tricks — no surprises or risk-taking here. The only performance of note is rising star Betty Gilpin ("The Hunt"), whose gleefully over-the-top delivery almost redeems even the most eye-rolling lines she's given. Otherwise, a mindless script and needlessly flippant approach to weighty subject matter makes "Coffee & Kareem" one of 2020's early disgraces. Its brain-frying power is available to stream directly into your living room. Lucky you.

Rating: 1/5

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Review: 'Nomadland' is an incisive study of the lonely, wandering heart

The film was screened at last weekend's Middleburg Film Festival.

By John Battiston, jbattiston@loudountimes.com

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Frances McDormand stars in "Nomadland."

Courtesy Photo/Searchlight Pictures

The 2008 global financial crisis and the seemingly perpetual economic slump that followed robbed many Americans of their essentials — stable income, retirement plans, roofs over their heads. Atop all those things, Fern, the protagonist of Chloé Zhao's new film, "Nomadland," lost her husband, Bo, and even their beloved town of Empire, Nevada. Long home to a steady gypsum mining operation, Empire's ZIP code was discontinued in 2011, leaving Fern (Frances McDormand) and her neighbors to fend for themselves amid the unforgiving detritus of a once-thriving economy.

Fern's solution? Vanguard. That's the cheeky name she gives her trusty van, which, with any bit of change she can spare, Fern outfits to be a suitable — well, suitable enough — home. Vanguard carries Fern from job to job, campsite to campsite, in the year following Empire's demise, anywhere there might be a decent bit of sun and even the most menial of occupations to keep Fern busy and, well, alive. "I need work. I like work," she earnestly tells an employment officer before being turned away.

But rather than Fern's physical survival, "Nomadland" closely studies her personal, emotional durability, a subject that blossoms quietly yet vibrantly when she integrates herself into a community of van-dwelling, modern-day nomads meandering across the American West, figures who've been dealt blows — both fiscal and more intimate — in recent years. Portrayed mostly by real-life figures featured in Jessica Bruder's 2017 nonfiction book of the same name, Fern's new family of vagabonds facilitate her journey of healing as she attempts to come to grips with her losses and grow into her new normal.

As writer-director Zhao's panoramic vision so incisively displays, loneliness and grief don't patch themselves up overnight. Though a striking showcase for the country's natural splendor, the gorgeous, widescreen frames in "Nomadland" indelibly highlight Fern's isolation, steadily enforcing Fern's crushing

reality: While she longs for the kinship and permanence she once so comfortably embraced, no circumstance will likely fill the void left by her former life, regardless of the beauty that surrounds it or the friendliness it embodies. The only constant she can come to accept is Vanguard, a makeshift fortress protecting Fern from her wavering, alien surroundings.

McDormand's performance, while undoubtedly imbued with her trademark, bright-eyed bite, will still rock viewers with its quiet sorrow. She masterfully weaves Fern's matronly, salt-of-the-earth qualities atop a guarded woundedness, endearing us to the character almost instantly while, more gradually, revealing her prideful, resistant, almost begrudging disposition toward her state of affairs. Each wave of joy and injurious pang she experiences while on the road is deeply felt, even with dialogue that seldom, if ever, rises to a shout. The film's decibel count as a whole barely surpasses the industrial hum of the Amazon warehouse where Fern finds temporary work, yet this placidity does little dampen the story's propulsion.

Following up her acclaimed 2017 feature "The Rider," Zhao has surely staked her claim as one of modern cinema's great contemplative artists. The film, which she also edited, boasts very few super-long takes or delayed cuts — choices a less refined craftsman might have made, to the story's detriment and the audience's distraction — yet her eye for framing and instinct for timing effectively wring maximum substance from each scene, however brief or seemingly inconsequential. Combined with McDormand's time-tested command of the camera, Zhao's ability to enrapture an audience with soft-spoken yet thoroughly penetrative storytelling will leave the viewer questioning his or her idea of what it truly means to be at home.

An exquisite study in trauma and recovery, "Nomadland" is one of the year's most deeply-cutting films. Though delicate on the surface, it will likely prove a forceful, wholly moving story, powerful to invigorate the senses of the privileged and the afflicted alike.

Rating: 4.5/5

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Review: 'The Devil All the Time' is a haunting melodrama

The new Netflix film launches Sept. 16.

By John Battiston, jbattiston@loudountimes.com

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Robert Pattinson stars in "The Devil All the Time."

Courtesy Photo/Netflix

Neither the casual observer nor the seasoned cartographer would likely pick up a map and sense any great tie between Coal Creek, West Virginia, and Knockemstiff, Ohio (you read that correctly). But as the narration that sets up Antonio Campos' new film, "The Devil All the Time," informs us, the two depressed towns and the road that lies between will provide the setting for momentous generational sin and moral bankruptcy in the two hours and 18 minutes to follow.

The film — based on Donald Ray Pollock's eponymous novel — delivers on the narrator's promise with nearly scene-to-scene regularity, following the thorny web of malfeasance woven by the nearly dozen-strong ensemble cast of characters. We watch helplessly as the shell-shocked, virulent psyche of World War II vet Willard Russell (Bill Skarsgård) — exacerbated by misguided religious fanaticism — erupts into fits of injurious outrage. Just as forlorn a bystander is Willard's son, Arvin, who sustains unimaginable emotional scarring from the desperate measures Willard takes in attempting to save his cancerous wife (Haley Bennett). But it's his reaction when he fails that proves most destructive.

Eight years later, a teenaged Arvin (Tom Holland) has inherited his father's pressure-cooker temperament, and the remainder of the film shows how this mean streak poisons the day-to-day conduct of everyone in his vicinity. What's more, it postulates that, no matter their occupation or religion or family tree, each person Arvin passes in the school halls, shares a cigarette with or eyes in church, try as hard as they might, is guilty of equal or greater depravity than he — as the movie's tagline reads,

"Everyone ends up in the same damned place." The loathsome misdeeds of the new-to-town preacher Preston (Robert Pattinson), Knockemstiff's sheriff (Sebastian Stan), his promiscuous sister (Riley Keough) and her murderous husband (Jason Clarke) also get plenty of screen time, though the origins of their wickedness are less fleshed out.

Particularly on trial is the role of religion, or the lack thereof, in loosing the monster within a man. While characters outside the church seem to view godlessness as a freeing, catalyzing agent for their nihilistic proclivities, the praying, churchgoing characters — namely Skarsgård's and Pattinson's — treat their faith as currency, either to accrue power and fuel influence or to stave off misfortune and justify their worst tendencies. As the film seems to communicate, those who populate the church pews have delusionally resigned themselves to a disappointing life spent waiting on an unresponsive higher power, while those who aspire to the pulpit are Machiavellian lowlifes with only themselves in mind. As such, "The Devil All the Time" makes for an often one-sided amorality play, uninterested in any notion that faith — Christian or otherwise — might be a source of inspiration, good will and hope for some.

That's not to say it's a poorly-crafted film, though. On the contrary, this is an often affecting and compelling melodrama with Southern Gothic sensibilities, though it doesn't achieve the Steinbeckian grandeur to which it clearly aspires. Frequently using wide-angle lenses and chiaroscuro lighting to highlight his characters' solipsism, Campos imbues every scene with an inevitable tension and dread, to the point that few viewers will manage to loosen their lower-neck muscles until the credits finally grant mercy. Whether playing someone deranged, cunning, stifled or just plain bad, each performer fills his or her shoes marvelously, particularly those at the top of the bill: Holland carries the torch from Skarsgård's groundwork-laying capriciousness, acting as the story's seldom-dormant time-bomb, though his sensitivities and weaknesses can be seen constantly stewing beneath his often rigid expression; and Pattinson's soft-spoken yet acidic charisma fuels an irrepressible demagoguery.

Yet while the main narrative involving Willard, Arvin, Preston and all those whose lifestyles they poison remains intriguing throughout, the film's cluster of side plots — particularly involving Stan, Keough and Clark — serve as little more than distractions with ultimately uninteresting ties to the A-story. Seldom-helpful narration nudges the viewer along when they're likely to question the necessity of a certain scene, and when the unifying narrative through line finally materializes, it's in the form of a sluggish, 15-minute finale that does little more than fizzle unsatisfactorily. The movie's not my definition of long, or even slow for that matter, but certainly a few plot points — perhaps even characters — could have been sacrificed from Pollock's story to form a tighter, more screen-friendly narrative.

"The Devil All the Time" is about as cynical a movie as they come — not quite blindly so, but certainly more stubborn in its misanthropy than it should be. Still, its storytelling works far more often than it doesn't, and it ought to effectively tranquilize anyone who can't help but find the summer-to-fall shift outside their window just a little too pleasant for their liking.

Rating: 3.5/5

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