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Movies, THE BOYS ARE BACK

THE BOYS ARE BACK

by debbie lynn elias

We are so used to seeing films with a predictable plot line of mother wrangling unruly child or lonely miserable single mother trying to befriend her single child that we forget there are single dads out there, too. However, when we do see them, they are generally divorced, a part-time only dad, and a girlfriend inevitably enters into the mix. Which is exactly what makes THE BOYS ARE BACK so refreshing, so enjoyable, so emotional and so entertaining, as it is the complete antithesis of these hackneyed worn out plot lines. THE BOYS ARE BACK is filled with heart and love, the beautiful Southern Australian seaside of Adelaide, one of the best performances of Clive Owens' stellar career, and a little six year old named Nicholas McNulty who is guaranteed to not only steal every scene, but your heart as well.



Joe Warr is your average dad. A hard working sportswriter, he is on the road much of the time leaving his six year old son Artie in the hands of his very capable and loving wife. Divorced, with a teenaged son living in England with his mother, Joe's first wife, Warr doesn't seem too distressed at the almost non-existent relationship with teenaged Harry, given his perfect, idyllic life in Australia with Katy and Artie. A former equestrian and daughter of local vintners, Katy is the calm in the eye of the family storm, keeping all the balls in the air, a clean and happy home, and love and devotion all around.

In the blink of an eye, however, everything changes, when Katy suffers a tragic death leaving Joe and Artie alone. With his beloved wife

literally dying in his arms, Joe is emotionally paralyzed. It's all he can do to put one foot in front of the other and worries more about Artie making it from day-to-day than he does himself. Adopting a parenting philosophy of "Just say yes", life at the Warr house gives a whole new meaning to the term "free-for-all." But as Joe and Artie are trying to find footing, another boy joins the pack - Joe's son Harry, who is coming from England to visit for the summer - a son that Joe has never really known.

Facing the responsibilities of single parenting, work obligations and the blend of two families, it doesn't take long for Joe's "just say yes" philosophy bears fruit to some interesting repercussions, the majority stemming from Joe being away to cover part of the Australian Open, leaving Harry and Artie to fend for themselves. And mind you, Harry is a teenaged boy exploring a new country, a new city on the seaside, facing peer pressure from some wannabe friends, but is filled with a beautiful love and sense of responsibility for his newfound brother and the need to please his father that will bring tears to your eyes.

For my money, this is the best performance of Clive Owen's multi-faceted career. Admittedly, "a very personal [role]. Parenting it's huge part of my life. This is the first script that really explores a big part of my life and from a guy's perspective. I was very very taken by that." As Joe Warr, Owen shows a side of himself that we have not seen before; that of a parent. One look at him and he radiates the love, pride and frustration that a parent has for a child. His scenes with McAnulty and George Mackay are not only endearing, but makes you want him as a parent. For me, I saw quite a bit of both my brothers in Owen's parental performance. Very involved in how the script was developed, Owen was instrumental in working with Allan Cubitt and Scott Hicks in "taking out any sentimentality or anything that didn't ring true" and calling on his own experiences as a parent to bring a new life to Joe Warr. Importantly, balancing out the drama of a man losing the love of his life, there is a lot of laughter in not only the character of Joe, but each of the boys, with much of it surrounding household chores and which Owen plays with a devilish little glint just like a little boy left to his own devices. A caveat here though folks, according to Owen, unlike Joe Warr's philosophy of "just say yes" and "let's leave the mess", his housekeeping skills are "MUCH better than Joe's. I'm actually pretty good at all that. But I'm not a very good cook. I do the washing up (dishes)."

But talk about a surprising performance, Nicholas McAnulty is life and exuberance personified. As Artie, he is his own version of the Warner Bros. Tasmanian Devil. A whirling dervish of charisma and charm, he is non-stop entertainment and steals every scene in the process. A "bundle of unpredictability." Described by Owen as being in that "crazy, manic, obsessive phase as all kids are when they are very young" it was a given for everyone after meeting him that McAnulty "would infuse the film with real life in a sense of unpredictability, and capturing that from him would be the challenge of the film." When you see McAnulty on screen, there will be no doubt in your mind that he is its heart and soul. Given the importance of the relationship between Joe and Artie, according to Owen means, "there's a lot resting on that kid. He's a very big part of the film and it's a lot to put on the shoulders of a young boy of that age." In order to develop a father-son trust between the two and knowing it hugely important that McAnulty trusted him, prior to shooting, Owen "took him out for days out away from his parents, away from the film people. We went to a wildlife park. We went to a fun fair. We went on our own. Said good-bye to everybody. I needed him to be able to trust me when things were not very well."



Also a standout is George Mackay who bears a striking resemblance to Rupert Grint. As Harry, Mackay bodes a maturity beyond his years in his approach, his attitude, his demeanor. Every move, every word, every tone is deliberate and well thought out. Described by Owen as being "such a lovely guy" and "very very fine actor", Mackay is a key ingredient to the male triumvirate.

Based on the 2001 award winning memoir by Simon Carr, screenwriter Allan Cubitt captures the heart of the Warr family and the fragility of life with a warmth, wit and reality that connects with the heart and soul. The characters are all full bodied and engaging, each as integral to the story and each other as the next with the familial structure taking a natural shape as the story progresses. Particularly notable is Cubitt's conveyance, through dialogue and the actors embodiment of each character, of the internal emotional turbulence raging within each of the three "boys" and the coping methods each employs, with Artie being both the nexus amongst them and the catalyst of expression. Difficult to write without seeming cliched is the decline of Katy and her ultimate death. Having had the privilege of reading Simon Carr's memoirs, Cubitt's delicate and sensitive portrayal combined with the tacit emotion conveyed by Clive Owen and Laura Fraser, is not only emotionally heart wrenching but uplifting and beautiful. Above all, Cubitt really brings a sense of celebration of life and timeless grace into the script that is enhanced by not only the acting, but the sublime direction of Scott Hicks. According to Clive Owen, who also serves as Executive Producer, "I thought it was very beautifully written, very accurate, very honest and it's sort of the ups and downs of parenting. I think it's a very well written

script." Also key according to Owen is the "equation of the teenage boy from the previous marriage coming into it. The dynamics became much more interesting because [Harry's] got everything that he's carrying. . .and then he's got to connect with the little one and then the little one [has to connect]. It's a very good way to explore quite complicated relationships." And Cubitt does it perfectly.



For approximately nine weeks, cast and crew got to call beautiful Adelaide, Australia their home. For director Scott Hicks, it actually meant working at home thanks to the local film commission who aided with financing. Described as a "healthy collaboration" among Hicks, his actors and his crew, shooting was basically structured around McAnulty's energy levels. Operating "very loosely" with a shooting schedule, ideas and plans often needed to be changed if McAnulty was tired or not exactly cooperating, thus mandating extreme patience on the part of the cast and crew. On meeting Hicks, I can't imagine a better director to exhibits patience for a child during shooting. He has a kindness and affability that spills over into his production.

Calling on Greig Fraser, a new generation of filmmaker whose visual delights can also be seen right now in Jane Campion's "Bright Star", the cinematography is exquisite. Lensing in Adelaide, the seaside community and rolling hills are used to their fullest beauty. Capitalizing on natural lighting and in certain instances, shooting from the balcony of Hicks' own house overlooking the sea, the visuals are breathtaking and at the same time, comforting with a golden twilight sun-drenched patina.

The icing on the cake is Hal Lindes' score. Known best for being a member of Dire Straits, Lindes' work by way of scoring and melding a soundtrack is appropriately propelling and compelling. It is so enjoyable I look forward to a soundtrack being available on the market soon, something that Hicks also looks forward to, particularly given that soundtracks from his prior films have gone on to be huge hits.

THE BOYS ARE BACK and not a moment to soon. Unspoken love, sibling rivalry, parent child conflicts (including taking out the trash) and internal conflicts all add to the multi-generational journey as the "boys" find their way and each other in a life filled with loss, grief, love and lots of laughter. "Just say yes" to THE BOYS ARE BACK.



Joe Warr - Clive Owen
Artie - Nicholas McAnulty

Harry - George Mackay

Directed by Scott Hicks. Written by Allan Cubitt based on the memoirs by Simon Carr.