

# Daily News Movie Reviews

Heartfelt study of fate hits a 'Grams' slam

**21 GRAMS** With Sean Penn, Naomi Watts, Benicio Del Toro. Director: Alejandro González Iñárritu. Loews Lincoln Square, New York 1 & 2, Clearview Chelsea (2:05). R: Violence, drug use, sexuality.

As darkness falls over the movie landscape comes the year's darkest and best movie of them all - Alejandro González Iñárritu's "21 Grams."

Why Hollywood saves its grimmest and most emotionally taxing films for the holiday season is a subject for essays, if not petitions. Yet of the several on the schedule, "21 Grams" presents the biggest challenge and may pack the biggest punch.

"Mystic River" fans may disagree, but I think it also features the year's strongest ensemble of performances, in a story about three strangers whose lives intersect after a tragic accident.

Standing out once again in a trio of central performers is Sean Penn, but for work that's on the flip side of the signature volatility he shows in "Mystic River."

Here, he plays Paul Rivers, a sensitive, unhappily married math professor who is rescued from his deathbed by a heart transplant. He then searches out the identity of his donor and begins a tenuous relationship with the donor's fragile widow, Christina (Naomi Watts).

The third person in the fated triangle is Jack (Benicio Del Toro), a born-again Christian and ex-con who becomes the target of his conscience and the two people pursuing him after his mistake alters all their lives.

If this were a conventionally told story, I'd be less coy about the plot. The accident that triggers everything might be the opening scene.

But as he did with his acclaimed "Amores Perros," Iñárritu organizes his story as a kaleidoscopic series of short sequences that leap forward and backward in time, creating the sense - some say confusion - that we have to absorb and decipher it all at once.

It is confusing for a while, because we see the characters both before and after the accident, and not necessarily in that order.

The first image in the film is of Paul in bed with Christina, which occurs long after the accident that brings them together. Within minutes - and between equally disjointed introductions to the other characters - we see him near death on oxygen, then in fine shape, then distressed somewhere with a gun in his hand.

Unlike "Memento," the reverse-told thriller to which it is being compared, "21 Grams" is highly stylized without being a stunt. Using the structure of "Amores Perros," Iñárritu takes his complex

tale of hope and redemption and breaks it into a mosaic of emotional tiles that add up to more than the whole.

The story reveals itself soon enough, but by forcing us to concentrate on each piece of the puzzle, Iñárritu and screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga heighten our connection to and empathy with their deeply wounded characters.

Penn's understated performance as a man who doesn't believe he deserves to be alive may be his best. But the real heartbreakers here are Watts, emotionally raw as a woman seeking revenge for her loss, and Del Toro, as a man turning against himself and the faith he believes both saved and abandoned him.

Among the other standouts in the cast are Melissa Leo, as Jack's long-suffering wife, and Charlotte Gainsbourg, as Paul's wife, who's prolonging their depleted union by trying to get pregnant before he dies.

"21 Grams," by the way, is the weight some believers attribute to the soul that departs at the moment of death. In contrast, the Oscar it might win weighs in at 8½ pounds.

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