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MOVIE REVIEW

FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW; Hearts Incapacitated, Souls Wasting Away

By ELVIS MITCHELL

"21 Grams" is a ruminative, stunned look at life after death -- that is, the existence of the living after they have been devastated by loss; it's the aftermath. The actors playing the characters who have been rocked by catastrophe don't sink to theatrical histrionics; instead they're linked by the red-eyed, unblinking stare of zombies, and they shamble through their day-by-day activities as if saddled with death wishes they are too enervated to act upon: American Existentialism.

The stars, Sean Penn, Benicio Del Toro and Naomi Watts, achieve something that doesn't sound as if it's possible: a virtuosity in the depiction of people wasting away minute by minute. Be prepared for it. You won't come out unaffected, because the depths of intimacy that the Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu plumbs here are so rarely touched by filmmakers that "21 Grams" is tantamount to the discovery of a new country. It's too early to call it a crowning work of a career -- this is only his second film -- but it may well be the crowning work of this year. It is being shown tomorrow night at the New York Film Festival and will be released nationwide on Nov. 14.

Working with the screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga and the bewiingly versatile cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto -- the team he assembled for his debut feature, "Amores Perros" -- Mr. González Iñárritu once again deals with three scenarios connected by one far-reaching cataclysm.

Prof. Paul Rivers (Mr. Penn) is suffering from a damaged heart, which is about to give out on him, and the transplant he receives so consumes him with guilt that he's like a death-row prisoner with a horrible secret who's been pardoned. He still believes he deserves to die. Cristina (Ms. Watts), a reformed party girl, has returned to her fal king up with Paul. She's lost her family in an auto accident. And Jack (Mr. Del Toro) is a shaggy, trembling mountain of anger he can barely contain. His already tenuous grasp on sobriety is slipping away even faster since being involved in a terrible incident.

"Amores Perros" dealt with the inevitability of Fate -- one's ability to handle a life-changing event that defined you as either an adult or a child. The theme of "21 Grams" is similar and uses a Faulknerian idea of Old Testament grace, focusing on three people unable to absorb that quality. And for Paul, Cristina and Jack, grace is a destination that, to quote "As I Lay Dying," is "a day's long, hard ride away." Mr. Arriaga's splintered style of storytelling -- breaking a mirror and piecing it back together with small, telling parts missing -- could owe as much to Faulkner as it does to Quentin Tarantino.

Passion is important here because the characters have it snatched from their souls. Pursuit of passion manifests itself for each of the three leads in totally different ways. Mr. Penn, an actor of sometimes embarrassingly direct volatility, plays Paul as a gentle but self-possessed man stripped of his intellectual arrogance. He still stands upright, but each move is unsteady. He regains part of that passion only in acts of dissolution, but he worsens things because these acts don't fulfill him.

Because Ms. Watts reinvents herself with each performance, it's easy to forget how brilliant she is. She has a boldness that comes from a lack of overemphasis, something actresses sometimes do to keep up with Mr. Penn, whose virtuosity can be a challenge. Cristina clings to Paul and to the self-abasement that is all she has left; she treats it like clinging. It's easy to note, though, that Cristina occasionally stares as if she could will her way to being by locating a vision of it on the horizon.

This triptych of psychological affliction is completed by the protean Mr. Del Toro. His potency as an actor is deepened because in addition to his emotional gifts he is a performer of great physical dignity; he loses it in "21 Grams," and it's a sure sign of the control Mr. Del Toro has that it can be seen slipping away.

The film is also full of fine supporting performances. Each of the characters' wrecked lives takes on fuller shape from the loved ones beaten down by neglect. Charlotte Gainsbourg plays Paul's wife, and her unusually striking face -- beautiful from one angle, odd from another -- is so completely expressive that it does much of the work for her. As Jack's wife, Melissa Leo makes her relationship to a man given to tremendous and simultaneous hostility and remorse so real it's absorbing and painful to watch.

The intelligence of completing the picture by displaying the suffering through the eyes of the leads' loved ones makes "21 Grams" an extraordinarily satisfying vision.

The title refers to the amount of mass said to escape the body at the moment of death -- the supposed weight of the soul. But the movie also evokes the majestic heartbreak of the Willie Nelson song "Three Days," a misery compounded by the sweetness of K. D. Lang's cover: "Three days, filled with tears and sorrow -- yesterday, today and tomorrow."

21 GRAMS

Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu; written by Guillermo Arriaga; director of photography, Rodrigo Prieto; edited by Stephen Mirrione; music by Gustavo Santaolalla; production designer, Brigitte Broch; produced by Mr. González Iñárritu and Robert Solerno; released by Focus Features. Running time: 125 minutes. This film is rated R. Shown tomorrow at 8:30 p.m. at Avery Fisher Hall, 165 West 65th Street, at Lincoln Center, as the closing night film of the 41st New York Film Festival.

WITH: Sean Penn (Paul Rivers), Benicio Del Toro (Jack Jordan), Naomi Watts (Cristina Peck), Charlotte Gainsbourg (Mary Rivers), Melissa Leo (Marianne Jordan), Clea DuVall (Claudia Williams) and Danny Huston (Michael Williams).