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21 Grams Review

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★★★ (R). The destinies of three tortured souls (Sean Penn, Naomi Watts, Benicio Del Toro) converge via a shattering road accident. Director Alejandro González Iñárritu follows up his audacious 2000 debut, "Amores Perros," with an emotionally wrenching story told with more ingenuity than it probably needed. The three leads are superb, as are Melissa Leo and Charlotte Gainsbourg in supporting roles. Written by Guillermo Arriaga. 2:05 (violence, vulgarities, sexuality, nudity, drug use). At select theaters.

Whether you liked it or not, "Amores Perros" definitely got your attention. Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu's 2000 debut wasn't screened so much chemical compound. Its convoluted shifts from the alley to the penthouse multicar pileup and out onto the edge of nowhere were orchestrated with a hit man's nerves and a break dancer's reflexes. One way or another, the movie made you impatient to see what its maker would do next.

And here it is - in English, somewhere in Middle America and with a slower, drier and far more somber beat than before.

On some level, "21 Grams" is "Amores Perros" with the antic energy sandblasted away. As with that first film, a traffic accident is catalyst for drastic upheavals in seemingly disparate lives. But the film's narrative strategy is, if anything, even more all-over-the-place than its predecessor, its sequence of events jumbled and twisted around like parts of a Rubik's cube.

Sifting through the puzzle, the audience can decipher the following story line: An ex-convict and recovering alcoholic named Jack (Benicio Del Toro), who's now a born-again Christian helping others find their way out of addiction, accidentally kills a and his two daughters with his truck. Emotionally and spiritually upended, Jack abandons his loyal wife (Melissa Leo) and children to lose himself in recrimination.

Meanwhile, the heart of the dead man is received by a mathematics professor named Paul (Sean Penn), who is then compelled to not only find out his donor's name but also stalk his grieving widow Christina (Naomi Watts), a onetime substance abuser who's hanging by a fragile emotional thread. Paul eventually confesses his identity to the skittish Christina, who accepts his love and then recruits him for a mission to pursue and liquidate the man who killed her family.

With help from his "Amores Perros" screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga, Iñárritu deploys his serendipitous theme and shifting time passages to drive home the movie's lesson of hope, faith and redemption. But in the end, his tactics become so obtrusive that they blunt the story's impact.

Almost. For the movie's real potency and resonance come in its remarkable trio of stars. Penn once again catches our expectations off guard with his incisive evocation of a logical man's illogical submission to compulsions he can neither fathom nor co persuasive dignity to a character whose martyrdom could look either foolish or overwrought in less capable hands. And then, there's Watts, whose command of mercurial emotional tone colors becomes more breathtaking with every dare she's taken since "Mulholland Drive" delivered her from relative obscurity two years ago.