

TESTING THE WATERS

After spending Sunday visiting with friends in New York City, I stayed over at a beautiful apartment near Lincoln Center, and then woke up early intending to hit the road back to Connecticut. On my way out the door in the morning, though, I decided to prolong my visit for a few hours after noticing that playing across the street at the Lincoln Plaza Cinemas was ***Frozen River*** (Sony Pictures Classics, 8/1), the film that won the Grand Jury Prize for Best Drama at this year's Sundance Film Festival, got picked up there for distribution, and went into limited release last Friday. Thanks to excellent reviews from both coasts (check out the raves from the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*) and also to its role in an online controversy (Thelma Adams' profile of star **Melissa Leo** touched off an impassioned back-and-forth-and-back-and-forth-and-back between AwardsDaily and GoldDerby, the original two Oscar blogs), the film has been generating quite a lot of media attention lately, so I plopped down \$11 and joined a bunch of octogenarians for an 11:15am screening to see for myself what all the fuss is about! I have no regrets.

If one tries to boil down and describe the plot of *Frozen River*—the first feature film written and directed by **Courtney Hunt**, who adapted it from a 15-minute short, featuring the same principal cast, that debuted at the New York Film Festival in 2004—it *can* sound a bit far-fetched. For the sake of brevity, let's just call it a less glossy, more believable version of television's popular show *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005-present)—a very solid character study, with a rare central role that calls for a strong woman, and an unspoken but unmistakable central theme that runs throughout its various storylines: the devolution of the American dream in present-day America. The film takes on a whole retinue of hot-button issues that are currently impacting the everyday lives of many average, hard-working Americans like Leo's Ray Eddy, who toils in a dead-end job as a cashier at a local dollar store: the challenges of raising children in single-parent families; the inability of working-class people to make ends meet even when they're doing everything they're supposed to be doing; the ongoing housing crisis; prohibitive prices at the gas pump; the widespread addiction to gambling that has plagued many who see no other hope of improving their situations; racial and ethnic tensions; and, yes, even illegal immigration, which some blame for many of the aforementioned issues, but without which this country might be unable to function. Whereas most films that take on such an ambitious slate of issues fall victim to partisanship, preachiness, and cliches, this one manages to seamlessly and subtly interweave them in a diplomatic way that provokes thoughts long after the end credits finish rolling.

The film is a long overdue showcase for Leo, as a recent *New York Times* profile of the veteran character actress duly notes, and as audiences can discern from the very first shot of the film. The camera offers an almost uncomfortably long and revealing close-up of Leo's face, *sans* makeup, and it is immediately clear that disappointment is nothing new to Ray Eddy, but also something that never gets old. For people like Ray, one disappointment leads to another, so that after a while it becomes nearly impossible to break out of the cycle. And yet, despite everything that befalls Ray, or that she herself invites, and despite the moments of great sadness that pervade the film, I believe that *Frozen River* ultimately offers a message of hope for a better future, if not for oneself then for one's children; it's the single most elemental aspect of the American dream, and it's what gets someone like Ray up in the morning, even in the face of humiliation. (She keeps promising her children a double-wide trailer to replace their uninsulated smaller version, but each time it arrives she fails to make payment and it is driven away; she scrapes together enough to give her kids lunch money, but some days can only offer popcorn and Tang for breakfast; she aspires to buy them the presents they desire for Christmas, but has neither the time nor the resources to do so; her boss promised she would be promoted after six months of work, but she's been on the job for two years without one, and her teenage son bets her that he can earn more money if she'd let him take on a job; and the list goes on.)

One last point: *Frozen River* looks a lot like *Affliction* (1997) and *A Simple Plan* (1998), and Leo's character is a close relative of Will Smith in *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006) and Michelle Monaghan in *Trucker* (2008), but from the very first shot the actress and film reminded me most of Tommy Lee Jones in last year's *In the Valley of Elah* (2007). Initially, this was simply because Leo's weathered and yet still handsome face struck me as the female equivalent of Tommy Lee Jones', as best illustrated in *Elah*, but the similarities continue. Also, like Jones' Hank Deerfield, Leo's Ray Eddy is a small-town American who stumbles into something much bigger than she ever intended, and nevertheless faces it fearlessly, defiantly, and selflessly out of love for her child(ren). Finally, *Elah* impressed most critics (72% approval on Rotten Tomatoes), turned off a few (especially the residual *Crash*-era haters of director Paul Haggis), and never found much of an audience among the general public (many said this was because all Iraq-related movies were bound to fail, but I think it was more because it was a serious, small movie without a bankable star), each of which I believe is likely to recur with *Frozen River*. What supporters of the film and of Leo can hold out hope for is that one *other* thing that happened to *Elah* will repeat itself: months after buzz about the film had died down, the raw performance of its veteran star still endured in the minds of enough voters to generate a surprise but well-deserved Oscar nomination. Will the ice hold long enough for Leo to pull off the same result? It's a very real possibility.