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This is Martin Bonner

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This is Martin Bonner

Abstract

This is a film review of *This is Martin Bonner* (2013) directed by Chad Hartigan.

Keywords

Prison Ministry, Christianity

This is Martin Bonner

Directed by Chad Hartigan

(NEXT)

This is Martin Bonner is a dual character study about reinventing yourself at mid-life and the unexpected partners who keep you honest and incarnate hope. This is



Chad Hartigan's second feature film following *Luke and Brie are on a First Date* (2008). The film was inspired by the real-life experiences of his divorced father who, in his 50's, had to re-create a life that was no longer defined by faith and family. This quiet film follows Martin as he sets up his new life in Reno and works for a Christian prison ministry that helps newly-released inmates reintegrate into society. Although he is not assigned as his mentor, the recently-released and regretful DUI murderer Travis is drawn to Martin and the film chronicles their budding friendship. It is a tale of both self-reliance and our need for others.

Christians are rarely portrayed in film with any sort of nuance. Hartigan, who was raised as a missionary kid overseas but no longer practices, wanted to create characters whose moral lives overrode stereotypes. "Typically, if a movie



Director/writer Chad Hartigan, Jeanette Reedy Solano, and inspiration for the film, Gerard Martin Hartigan, the director's father.

has Christian characters," Hartigan explained, "either the whole movie is trying to indoctrinate you and has a Christian agenda, or the movie goes out of its way to show the Christian characters as being flawed or crazy," (exemplified in another Sundance film this year, *C.O.G.*). Hartigan does give us those, you-just-want-to-slap-them cheery Christians

(Steve and his adoring wife). Unfortunately, he falls short of fleshing out a mature, post-dark-night-of-the-soul character in Martin. During the confessional scene at the diner, Martin describes his mid-life crisis of faith: "I woke up one morning realizing I had given myself [to God's service] and I didn't want to give anymore." Yet, we never hear about his post-crisis reassembling of any sort of faith. He continues to work with a ministry because no one else would hire him with his Christian resume.

Hartigan's familiarity with Christian culture and theology is apparent, and allusions, such as Calvin's invisible Kingdom, might go unnoticed by the average viewer. While Martin does not try to proselytize Travis, he does exemplify the transformative power of faith for Travis. Neat, cheery Evangelicalism clearly makes the ex-con uncomfortable. When Travis is prompted by the videographer

(Hartigan's father's real post-divorce job), to explain how the program has changed him, he ruminates for a while and then responds: "I think it's made me a good person because it's shown me what a good person looks like, you know?" For Travis, Martin incarnates the moral heart of the Kingdom of God, he makes the invisible visible...and real enough to sit across from you in a diner.

Hartigan punctuates the drama with moments of levity, for example when Martin dances alone in his apartment and plays air guitar to a scratchy, dated recording of a band that Paul Eenhoorn (who plays Bonner) fronted in his youth in the 1960's in Perth, called Kopyrite. The song, "Genevieve," is a pumping rock tune and we see a glimpse of the twenty-something Eenhoorn as he sings and grooves with abandon in his sparse apartment. Comic relief is also inserted during the scene where Martin, to appease his concerned daughter, agrees to a speed dating soiree.

The acting is quietly understated and natural and both male leads are magnetic in their authenticity. Eenhoorn is an Australian thespian with almost half a century of mostly character roles under his belt. He exudes a persistent loneliness and mild depression, however, this is overshadowed by his innate good humor and practical resourcefulness. Perhaps his performance is so real because Eenhoorn himself admits, "I was in Martin's frame of mind, I was in crisis" when he shot the film, and he allowed his personal life to display itself in the role. Most

strikingly, you trust Martin to be honest with you. He screwed up, he had a crisis of faith, he has a bit of a temper and can be awkward at times, but he is a wise soul with whom you want to have coffee.

Richmond Arquette's performance is nuanced and complex. Unlike most recently-released angry convicts, Arquette's Travis is defined by regret and turmoil, tempered with a palpable tenderness. "I think for all his own confusion, Travis is a strongly intuitive guy. He is really confused by life, he doesn't feel he has much control in life, but he desperately wants to grow, to change," explains Arquette. Travis admits, "I feel like a fraud" around his appointed "very Christian" sponsor Steve (exuberantly played by Robert Longstreet). Arquette, who has had many roles in Fincher films - *Se7en*, *Fight Club*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* - brings us a subtle, flawed character who, despite his criminal past, is painfully persistent in his desire to reinvent himself-if only he can find a guide. Whether sitting in a diner or a parking lot attendant's booth, there is much roiling inside him.

Despite being present in only one scene, mention must be made of Demetrius Grosse's angry convict Locy who explodes during the first scene. His fiery and straight shooting interrogation of Martin is powerful and raw. The opposite demeanor characterizes Travis' daughter Diana, a bookish grad student in library science played by Sam Buchanan. Her diner reunion with her father is the

dramatic climax of a meandering film. Buchanan, in her furtive glances at the menu and in her body language, captures the awkwardness of an abandoned child who longs to connect with her father, but has marinated in anger and loss for far too long.

This is Martin Bonner is that rare mid-life character study indie film that may be overlooked by Hollywood, but is well worth watching for anyone interested in a tale of male friendship and losing, then finding faith. It is a thoughtful film from a talented new director and writer. The story picks up where Vera Farmiga's mid-life crisis of faith story, *Higher Ground* (based on Carolyn Briggs' memoir, *This Dark World*) leaves off and raises the question: how do you live a life of faith, meaning, and service after you have stepped out of dogmatic, institutionalized religious roles?

— Jeanette Reedy Solano