Ghostlight

Christopher R. Deacy
University of Kent at Canterbury - U.K., c.deacy@kent.ac.uk

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Abstract
This is a film review of *Ghostlight* (2024), directed by Kelly O’Sullivan.

Keywords
Romeo and Juliet, Theater, Grief

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Author Notes
Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred (Oxford University Press, 2016); Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film (Routledge, 2012); and Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy: https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567
Grief can be dealt with in the movies in many shorthand ways, giving us a failure to accept a situation, a lack of connection with family or friends who may also be mourning a loss, and it is a familiar movie trope for someone to enter the life of a character who can set them on a different, more rehabilitative or redemptive path. But *Ghostlight* has a different sort of steer, giving us a Shakespearean play as a counterpart and counterpoint to the pent-up anger and grief that a father, Dan (Keith Kupferer), whose family and work life is dangling on a thread, feels when his son dies in the arms of his girlfriend, and the brokenness of the family unit is then brought back together,
at least temporarily, by the production of an amateur dramatics group of *Romeo and Juliet* which mirrors, perhaps a little too forcefully, the ‘real life’ tragedy that is unfolding. Art meets life, and the only way in which a family can come together is when the father—a construction worker who is at risk of losing his job after taking out his rage on a driver who offends him—can express himself, at first reluctantly, through his iteration of Romeo. This enables him to come closer to his grieving daughter, and this in turn enables them both to discover some measure of healing and redemption.

The daughter had been auditioning for a Broadway production of *Oklahoma* when the tragedy struck, and she at first assumes that her taciturn father’s mysterious sneaking out at night was because he was cheating on her mother. She then discovers the truth of where he has been going, and how the performance of a play enables him to seek closure in his personal life. In many movies, we don’t feel we understand or care about the characters enough to feel their pain or trauma—but here it is painstakingly, and viscerally, fleshed out to the point that once (towards the end) some facile and quite belabored analogies are drawn between the play and their real lives, the three-dimensional characterization has already mitigated any sense that we are being force-fed or merely going through the motions. The family in the film is a real-life family unit, and it is a testimony to the freshness of this community theatre presentation that the actors playing Romeo and Juliet are in their 50s, yet they are at stages in their lives whereby they can more readily identify with their literary counterparts precisely because of their life experience and struggle with mortality. Dan confronts his personal demons on stage, in which the death within the play of his daughter affords him a chance to grieve for his son, and to see perhaps for the first time her own pain and how her own needs and desperation to talk about her deceased brother can now be brought, literally, center-stage.
This is a quotidian movie, completely within a setting that feels authentic and ordinary, in which a band of eccentrics and misfits try to become the characters they play but are incapable of being anything other than themselves. The play becomes the conduit for a father’s, a family’s, and a wider community’s ability to re-face tragedy, with the moment of catharsis coming in the one-night-only production at a local school. Dan does not know the story of *Romeo and Juliet* and so it feels as though he is gradually learning about himself in tandem with learning the words and acting required on the stage, and while it is way too contrived that the actual manner of his son’s death matches the denouement of the play, *Ghostlight* works precisely because it shows us the way serendipity, fate, opportunity, and chance weave their way through all of our lives. The central paradox is that the more inadequate Dan feels to play against his gruff, taciturn exterior as a stage actor, the greater his path to redemption. Art can sometimes resonate with reality more strongly than the exigencies of real life.