

Film probes post-death family crisis

NEW YORK (CNS) — Single motherhood is in vogue in the cinema and the most realistic, unsentimental film of the batch is "Men Don't Leave" (Warner Bros.), a pastiche of family crises and coping mechanisms put into play by the death of a father.

Director Paul Brickman and screenwriter Barbara Benedek sensitively zero in on Beth Macauley (Jessica Lange), a comfortably set and much-loved wife of rugged John (Tom Mason) and the mother of two strapping boys, 17-year-old Chris (Chris O'Donnell) and 10-year-old Matt (Charlie Korsmo). Matt frames the film with an opening and closing voice-over narrative about feeling safe, a state of mind that is immediately lost when his father is killed in an explosion.

The quintessential housewife, Beth numbly faces the reality of her loss and sizable debts and the need to join the work force to keep a roof over her family's head.

What follows are the various mechanisms used by Beth and her sons to deal with their grief, which is compounded by the sudden loss of their comfortable lifestyle.

Each family member must learn to adapt to the reality at hand and ultimately to realign as a new family unit, minus Dad. In cases where their grief was initially stifled, it eventually comes to the fore through self-destructive behavior.

Little Matt refuses to cry over his dad and secretly fears that he now will lose his mother, too. So he takes up with a pint-sized thief (Corey Carrier) who teaches him how to steal VCRs and fence them for cash that Matt then recycles into lottery tickets. He hopes to use his winnings to



After her husband's sudden death, a housewife (Jessica Lange) is forced to be both mother and father to her two sons in 'Men Don't Leave,' which the U.S. Catholic Conference classifies as A-III — adults.

buy back the family home and save his mother's life.

Chris is gladly seduced by a whimsical X-ray technician (Joan Cusack), several years his senior. Despite his precocious May-September sexual relationship, he resents his mother's friendship with an avant-garde musician, Charles (Arliss Howard).

Although Charles is every woman's dream man — sensitive, paternal, patient and kind — he is no match for Chris or Beth, who pulls away before the couple can get to first base.

Beth is virtually a mess of contradictions which is to be expected. She handles the post-funeral planning, moving, settling in and job search well. But when none of the above turns out as expected and her sons begin drifting into other "family" units to

regain a semblance of security, Beth becomes more and more isolated and retreats to her bed.

Lange is totally believable and poignant as Beth, a contented career housewife suddenly forced to be both mother and father to her sons. Her attempts to cope with her own and her sons' grief, her first feelings for another man and her shock and loneliness are real.

O'Donnell and Korsmo, who make their acting debuts here, are especially winning. O'Donnell pulls out all the stops when he begs Charles to make one more attempt to court his mother. And Korsmo is both adorable and heartbreaking as little boy lost, Matt. As Chris's nutty friend, lover and surrogate mom, Cusack almost steals the show, adding much needed levity to a pretty grim family scenario.

Although this film deals with many real issues faced by young people grieving the death of a parent, younger children might be upset by its depiction of the sudden loss of a parent.

Also, since the 17-year-old adolescent is involved in a sexual relationship with an older woman — despite his mother's clear disapproval — parents and adolescents may need to share and discuss their viewing of this otherwise relevant film about loss, grief and family renewal.

Due to some rough language and sexual situations involving an adolescent, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

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