

'Paradise' touches heart; thrillers hit, miss

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK (CNS) — A young couple overwhelmed by the loss of their toddler and a young boy afraid his parents are breaking up affect each other touchingly in *Paradise* (Touchstone).

Ten-year-old Willard (Elijah Wood) arrives in the rural community of Paradise for the summer when his mom leaves him with her childhood pal, Lily Reed (Melanie Griffith). Willard senses but doesn't understand the unspoken tension between Lily and her husband, Ben (Don Johnson).

A shy and insecure boy, Willard is scared his Navy dad won't be coming home anymore. And substitute father-figure Ben is none too welcoming. At least he finds someone to play with in tomboy Billie (Thora Birch), who never met her own wandering father.

As Lily and Ben open up to the child, their own emotional distance widens. And Willard realizes the reason is rooted in each one's individual grief over losing their only child three years earlier.

As written and directed by Mary Agnes Donoghue, the movie is a sensitive look at childhood fears and adult pain.

The ensemble cast, including Sheila McCarthy as Billie's man-hungry mom, really inhabit their roles and catch the rhythm of small town America.

The children's playfulness and the determination of Billie's mom to rope a husband keep the movie's serious themes of bereavement and failed relationships



Above, Willard Young (Elijah Wood) befriends a tomboy named Billie (Thora Birch) in *Paradise*. Together they learn about accepting life's challenges and disappointments. Below, Don Johnson (left) and Melanie Griffith star as Ben and Lily Reed, a couple struggling to overcome a deep personal tragedy with the help of Willard Young (Wood).

from becoming depressing. Indeed the gradual manner in which the characters cope with their troubles makes the upbeat ending both believable and joyous.

Johnson and Griffith seldom articulate their grief and feelings of guilt but it will be clearly felt by viewers. While the film is a small story with little action or show-stopping scenes of dramatic tension, it's a finely observed tale of ordinary folks learning to trust in their shared humanity to get them through what sometimes is a vale of tears.

Because of a fleeting shot of a sexual encounter, glimpse of nudity and several sexual references, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned that some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

'Dead Again'

While trying to regain her lost identity, a beautiful amnesiac finds herself haunted by someone else's terrifying nightmares in *Dead Again* (Paramount).

Los Angeles private eye Mike Church (Kenneth Branagh) wants to help this woman (Emma Thompson) he chooses to call Grace. He names her after a kindly nun from his childhood.

So does a middle-aged antiques dealer, Franklyn Madson (Derek Jacobi), who hypnotizes her in hope that she will reveal her identity. Instead she regresses to the late 1940s and an apparently former life as Margaret Strauss, whose jealous husband Roman was executed for her murder.

As they try to sort out this reincarnation possibility, Grace is troubled by night-



mares of impending murder. Black and white flashbacks flesh out the Strauss marriage, strained by the presence of Strauss' haughty live-in housekeeper (Hanna Schygulla) and imperiled by a reporter's (Andy Garcia) attraction to the elegant Margaret.

Complicating matters in the present day is the fact that Grace and Church are falling in love, which terrifies her as further hypnosis suggests that Church was in fact Roman in his previous life.

Will their romance result in her ending up dead — again?

Director Branagh turns in a sophisticated thriller in which he and his real-life wife Thompson skillfully play dual roles as the past and present lovers.

The intricate story is tautly edited and filmed with a keen eye for sleek visuals, mood and heightened suspense. Reincar-

nation is used to good effect here, providing grist for two intersecting murder mysteries that finally tie up neatly if, unfortunately, not bloodlessly.

Diverse characters give texture to the movie, including Robin Williams as an eerie psychiatrist turned greengrocer and Campbell Scott as a fraudulent fiance. Garcia, the lovelorn reporter, is a melancholy presence throughout. He turns positively spooky near the chilling end. Jacobi contributes a slick performance of sinister proportions.

The movie's drawback is its pretentious tone, as if it knew it was good and doesn't hesitate to flaunt it. This can be distracting, as in the unconvincing scene of Grace and Church slow dancing on a rooftop during a downpour.

Nor does the movie need such a strident music score to telegraph its key moments. It's a classy romantic thriller with crackling-good suspense; it just doesn't have to get arrogant about it.

Due to some brief, intense violence, intermittent rough language and mild sexual innuendo, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

'Freddy's Dead'

New Line Cinema promises that the sixth installment is the last Freddy Krueger slasher movie, so they've called it *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*.

This time a young dream therapist (Lisa Zane) — who is having her own nightmares — attempts to help four youngsters who are terrified of sleeping lest they never wake up. Guess what? They are right, and you'll get to see Freddy (Robert Englund) enter their dreams, torture and kill most of them before the therapist slaughters him to avenge her own mother's death.

When she turns out to be his daughter, and since she has killed with such gusto, does it matter that Freddy's dead? One suspects that it's in her blood and the scepter is merely being passed to a new monster.

Although they require wearing headache-inducing 3-D glasses the last 15 minutes, the movie's dream imagery and special effects are impressive.

Still, there's no getting around that this movie wallows in violence and encourages laughter at the scenes of teens being tortured and then horribly dispatched.

Let's hope this nightmare series stays dead.

Due to deadly violence depicted as entertaining and recurring rough language, the USCC classification is O — morally offensive. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.



Peter Sorel-Paramount Pictures
Andy Garcia stars as news reporter Gray Baker in *Dead Again*, which is directed by Kenneth Branagh.

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