

Foster proves herself behind camera with 'Tate'

By Gerri Pare
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — A 7-year-old child prodigy is torn between two very different women in his life in *Little Man Tate* (Orion).

Jodie Foster stars as single mom Dede Tate, a gum-cracking waitress who is nuts about her little boy, Fred (Adam Hann-Byrd). But she also feels for him — he's a lonely child who doesn't fit in with the other kids at school and who worries so much he has ulcers.

Reluctantly she entrusts Fred for three weeks to the care of austere child psychologist Dr. Jane Grierson (Dianne Wiest), who is studying gifted children and can challenge Fred's mind in a competitive setting with other genius-level kids.

The doctor recognizes Fred's tremendous potential and wants his talents to be developed constantly. She arrogantly convinces Dede to let her have Fred for a summer at college.

As Dede desperately misses the light of her life, solemn little Fred thinks he has finally found a best friend in college student Eddie (Harry Connick Jr.). But he's disappointed when he bursts



Suzanne Hanover-Orion Pictures
Jodie Foster (right) and Adam Hann-Byrd star as Dede and Fred Tate in *Little Man Tate*, which marks Foster's directorial debut.

in on Eddie entertaining a woman in his room and is gently told there are some adult situations he is too young to experience.

Dr. Grierson can stimulate his intellect, of course, but she hasn't a clue as to how to provide the vulnerable child with what his mother has always given him — spontaneous warmth, love and emotional support.

For her directorial debut Foster has

chosen a serious story and culled sensitive performances from the leads — including herself.

The opening scenes quickly establish the close bond between mother and child. Through Fred's eyes we see his difficult world. Too brainy to be popular with kids his age and bored by a school that ignores his special needs, Fred almost never smiles. As he attempts to understand the bewildering

world of adults, his grave face communicates his growing sense of loneliness.

Foster's understated performance is equally poignant. Fred is her whole world, but she loves him enough to put his best interests first. This means facing the fear of losing him to a brilliant, wealthy woman who threatens her.

Wiest is the character who changes the most. Little Fred urges her to take a new look at life, seeing it as something more than purely intellectual concerns. The growth is most telling in a scene where he asks with childlike innocence, "What's wrong with you?"

While it can be applauded for broaching an unglamorous theme — the problems gifted children face — *Little Man Tate* damages its credibility with a tacked-on happy ending that is sheer Hollywood. However, it's an entertaining, quality film that deserves an audience and it marks a promising debut for director Foster.

Because of a brief bedroom scene, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

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