

'Mystic River' is suspenseful, sobering

Gerri Pare/CNS

NEW YORK — A childhood incident has shattering consequences when a murder reunites three former friends in the Clint Eastwood-directed "Mystic River."

Although this is not a morally satisfying film where the clarity of black-and-white characterizations leads to good triumphing over evil, it is a work that screams its repulsion at those who have harmed a child — and demonstrates the terrible effects that can have.

The setting is a working-class Boston neighborhood where three boys are carving their name in wet cement when a car pulls up and two men claiming to be cops scold them — and order Dave, the most timid boy, into their car. Three days later Dave escapes from them, forever haunted by the sexual abuse he suffered at their hands.

Nearly 30 years later, the three are no longer friends, although Dave (Tim Robbins) and Jimmy (Sean Penn) have married cousins. Sean (Kevin Bacon) is a troubled homicide detective whose wife left him months ago, gave birth and phones him periodically — but never answers his plea to come home or at least tell him the baby's name. Jimmy went to the other side of the law, served time, and now is a corner-store owner and devoted family man, father of three girls. Katie (Emmy Rossum), the oldest at 19, is the apple of his eye.

Underachiever Dave has a little boy and an earnest wife, Celeste (Marcia Gay Harden), who tolerates his moodiness and secretive ways.

The story kicks into high gear when Katie and her girlfriends go out bar-hopping the night before her planned elopement with a young man (Thomas Guiry) her dad detests. In the middle of the night, Dave arrives home in bloody clothes and tells Celeste a suspect story about overreacting to a mugger, killing him and fleeing.

But the next day, Katie's bloodied body is discovered and detective Sean is assigned to the case. An enraged Jimmy promises to get the killer himself and uses his thuggish brothers-in-law to scour the neighborhood for information.

As Sean focuses on Katie's boyfriend and his tangled family history, he can't ignore a very nervous Dave as an emerging suspect, but determines to sort it all out before a near-crazed Jimmy falls off the straight and narrow.

With a script by Brian Helgeland ("L.A. Confidential") from Dennis Lehane's riveting best seller, East-



Warner Bros./CNS

Sean Penn and Kevin Bacon star in a scene from the dramatic movie, "Mystic River."

wood has a taut narrative to work with and gets some remarkable performances from his cast. Hands down, Penn steals the movie from the ensemble cast; his grief fueling the emotional heart of the story. His portrayal, at once intensely reined in yet explosive, may be impossible for

academy members to ignore at Oscar-nomination time.

Bacon's detective fills the bill, as does Laurence Fishburne in a smaller role as his police partner, but another standout is Robbins, who conveys how deeply frightened and vulnerable Dave is. As Jimmy's wife,

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Laura Linney shows her cold practicality when push comes to shove and justice be damned, while Harden as Dave's wife gradually unravels on screen.

Though grimly disturbing, "Mystic River" manages to be both a suspenseful and sobering meditation on our flawed human nature and capacity for evil.

Because of brief but intense violence, much rough language and occasional profanity, the USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

Pare is the director of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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