

I KNOW NOT SEEMS

In The Bedroom, directed by Todd Field.
Reviewed by Harvey Roy Greenberg

Hardly had the Twin Towers fallen when the media began haranguing traumatized New Yorkers to "let the healing begin!" The usual suspects were trotted out to teach us the "appropriate" means of "moving on", "getting closure". After the New Orleans flooding, sundry college massacres and plane crashes, the same absurdist counsel continued to be flogged by Oprah and company. According to Dr. Phil absurdist arithmetic, too much suffering after catastrophic loss was somehow unseemly, indecorous.

One recalls Hamlet's bitter rejoinder to his adulterous mother: fresh from her husband's murderer's bed, Gertrude cozily entreats her son not to seek his father in the dust. With death a necessary end, why seems his loss so "particular"?:

Hamlet: "Seems, Madam! Nay, it **is**: I know not "seems" ...
I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe.

The ground zero of inconsolable grief is the harrowing terrain of Todd Field's accomplished first film, In The Bedroom. It's set in the midcoast Maine town of Camden, during a languorous summer often seen in the region, all the more lovely for its brevity. In the establishing sequence, a couple races through windblown grass, fall into each others arms, greedily kiss.

The young man, Frank Fowler (Nick Stahl), is about to enter an architectural program elsewhere. He exhibits the appealing vulnerability of a gangly late adolescent. His lover, Natalie Strout (Marisa Tomei), is about ten years older than Frank. She's recently ditched her abusive husband, Richard (William Mapother), the worthless scion of a prosperous cannery owner.

Frank's father, Matt (Tom Wilkinson) is a successful physician, a man's man, solid as Maine granite. His mother, Ruth (Sissy Spacek), a sophisticated New Yorker transplant, teaches music at a local college. Her self-effacing facade conceals an astringent, ironic intelligence.

One senses Matt always has been both irritated by, and attracted to Ruth's tough side. His complacent affability equably balances her tetchiness. As he sees it, he pretty much lets her have her own way so long as it doesn't compromise his well-ordered life -- his lucrative practise; a lobstering sideline learned in his youth; his lifelong friendships within a klatch of crusty buddies.

Now, however, the unvoiced arrangements and compromises which over years sustain reasonably happy partners like the Fowlers' are being stretched thin by Frank's febrile infatuation. Matt deems the liason benign midsummer madness. Ruth acknowledges Natalie's sweetness with cool detachment, deeming her hopelessly out of her social and intellectual depth; a bruised soul with a tarnished reputation. Ruth is concerned that the affair may prevent Frank from quitting Camden in the fall. But, typical of the film's psychological canniness, she also obscurely senses that Natalie's ripe sensuality and raw neediness pose more immediate danger.

Frank bristles at what he perceives as Ruth's gross manipulations. He secretly confides to Matt that he's indeed thinking of settling down with Natalie instead of going to school, working the lobster traps, becoming the reliable father her kids have lacked. One speculates that Frank's desire to assume the immense burden of caring for this broken family at his tender age is informed by an identification with Matt's absolute dependability, as well an abiding affection he shares with Matt for the rugged Maine land- and seascape.

The Fowler's collective crises easily might have comprised the stuff of soap opera. But a superlative script; exceptionally discerning performances (notably by Spacek); Thomas Newman's brooding score; Todd Field's secure grasp of the region and its flinty personalities combine to charge In The Bedroom with the ominous inevitability of Sophoclean tragedy, in which personal flaws will mesh lethally with social faultlines.

Inflamed by jealousy, Natalie's weasle husband barges into her home in yet another attempt to either inveigle or menace her into reconciliation. When Frank intervenes, he brutally assaults them both. To Ruth's exasperated amazement, neither the couple nor Matt want the police involved (Frank's violence is hardly new, but Natalie ambivalently has never sought a restraining order). A few days later, Natalie phones Frank hysterically. She's barricaded upstairs with the children while Richard rages below. Frank races to her rescue -- and Richard shatters his skull with a single shot.

With excruciating precision, In The Bedroom depicts the devastating impact of Frank's murder upon his despondent parents. Over the next months, in the uncanny fashion of the newly dead, Frank becomes an palpably excruciating absent presence. No clear image of him is shown save for a tantalizing glimpse in Matt's mind of the child Frank smiling down at him from a tree. Through Antonio Calvache's lapidary camera, a Zen-like shimmer of "suchness" seems to emanate from the objects Frank touched, made, loved -- rumpled bedclothes in his room; drawings for a lobster boat he planned to build; assorted fishing lures, bobbers, a fragment of green beach glass Matt discovers in a tiny box.

The incarcerated Richard claims that Frank accidentally died during their scuffle. Natalie tearfully confesses she only heard the fatal shot, negating her previous testimony that she actually saw Richard murder Frank, thereby thoroughly compromising her probity. Richard is promptly released on bail provided by his family. The retraumatized Fowlers are told by an incompetent (or possibly bought off) DA that Richard can only be convicted of manslaughter. At best, he'll serve a few years of soft time.

Justice deferred and denied compounds the unravelling of the Fowlers' marriage. Their escalating estrangement is encapsulated in an extraordinary sequence of brief domestic scenes, hallmarked by incisive Hopperesque visuals. Gradually they sink into strained silence, occasionally punctuated by a perfunctory acknowledgement.

On the surface Matt seems to have adjusted better to his son's loss than Ruth. He immerses himself in household chores, returns to his practise and his friends' solace. Meanwhile Ruth becomes consumed in training a girls' chorus to sing wild Balkan folk music at the town's annual Labor Day festivities. At home she retreats into reproachful isolation, angrily chainsmoking before the lulling gabble of trash TV.

The couples' icy detente is finally shattered when Ruth glimpses Richard while shopping and returns home, consumed with fury. Her subsequent quarrel with Matt is arguably the most acutely observed depiction of marital dysharmony and its resolution since Bergman's Scenes From A Marriage. The Fowlers flay each other with wounding insights only acquired by long intimacy, ordinarily avoided during kinder times. Ruth blames Matt for encouraging the affair so as to

savor a middle-aged, proxy pleasure from Frank's scoring the local sexpot; and for closing himself off with customary stoicism. Matt rails at Ruth about her relentless, elitist criticism of Frank and Natalie -- which he infers drove Frank into an unchallenging relationship with a docile child-woman. On the cusp of irreparable harm, they suddenly embrace in tears, tacitly acknowledge they've been flailing at each other rather than admit their impotence before Frank's murder and Richard's shameful release.

At this point, a conventional narrative would have had the reconciled Fowlers commence putting their lives back together. But no such facile recuperation occurs. By compelling Matt to break through his perpetual suppression of feelings, Ruth has also kindled his enormous rage, as well as his guilt about his inability to address her suffering (augmenting the loneliness she's always felt as an outsider). He kidnaps Richard to a distant cabin with the help of his best friend, clumsily kills him, buries his body.

The "bedroom" in the film's title refers to the netted, baited compartment of a lobster trap. Early in the film, Matt tells Frank that two male lobsters entangled "in the bedroom" will claw each other to death. Jean Cocteau characterized the Oedipus tragedy as an 'infernal machine'. The mainspring of the film's hellish machinery is Richard's brute masculine aggression, conflated with paranoid competitiveness, driving him to slaughter Frank for invading his own bedroom. Natalie comprises the bait of the Oedipal trap.

But the film also subtly intimates that Richard's yahoo savagery is the most pathological manifestation of a macho sensibility which has always pervaded and distorted Camden's social structure. The film articulates companionable male bonding like Matt's lobstering with his son, or Matt's poker game of many years, with the ruthless exercise of prerogative by the patriarchal town rulers (the most powerful of whom may well be Richard's unseen father). In this world, women exist only to serve, to console -- or, in Natalie's case, to tempt. One surmises that Ruth quickly grasped that if her marriage was to survive, she had to make a token accommodation to the repressive status quo -- but always fervently hoped her son would escape it.

Natalie's ferocious interrogation by a male top legal gun, combined with behind-the-scenes collusion by Camden's masculine oligarchy, puts Richard back on the street instead of behind bars. The spirit of macho gunfighter revenge is ignited anew, this time in Matt, that most unviolent of souls. After maladroitly executing Richard, Matt returns home, profoundly troubled. Transformed into a remorseless Fury, Ruth unambivalently approves Richard's murder -- betokening her fall from moral grace.

On the verge of escape into sleep, Natt mentions a picture he saw in Richard's bedroom of Richard and Natalie, happily embracing. "I don't know", he mutters. These are his last words -- and the last in the film -- as he turns away from his wife. One senses that this time he's cut her adrift irretrievably.

"When you kill a man, you take away all he's got, all he'll ever get," observes Will Munny, the anti-hero gunslinger of Clint Eastwood's formidable revisionist western *Unforgiven*. Suddenly perceiving the stark significance of 'taking away' away the plenitude of Richard's life, no matter how base it was, Matt plunges into an existential void.

Whether he will ever be brought to justice is utterly beside the point. The retribution which was supposed to redress Frank's loss has only escalated its unredeemability. The Fowlers' complicity in Richard's death makes it impossible for them to solace each other over their son's

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death. Hopelessly alienated, condemned to an eternal purgatory of forsaken despair, Matt and Ruth are bound on King Lear's wheel of fire -- "where my own tears do scald like molten lead..."