

Weepies: "Frequency" and "Where the Heart Is"

Written by Mike Schulz
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FREQUENCY

All tearjerkers, in one way or another, focus on death. Tearjerkers for Guys, however, focus on the death (or impending death) of one's father. For my money, the *crème de la crème* of this genre is

Field of Dreams

, where Kevin Costner's love of baseball (another Tearjerkers-for-Guys staple) leads to the resurrection of his long-deceased dad, and which is so shamelessly manipulative and contrived and

romantic

about its supernatural and spiritual possibilities that it's irresistible.

Sadly, though, most of the other entries in this genre don't work nearly as well. It's partly because many of them feature Jack Lemmon overacting like mad (in films like *Tribute*, *Dad*, and

T

uesdays with Morrie

), but mostly it's because of a built-in flaw with these tearjerkers in general: they're static (it's hard to work up much momentum with someone on a deathbed), and oftentimes, rather dull.

They don't feel like

movies

. (Many of them, including a rare good one like

I Never Sang for My Father

, are based on novels and plays, and should have stayed in those mediums.)

That's why you'd be right to expect more from Gregory Hoblit's *Frequency*, which combines father-son bonding with a tale about time travel, a serial killer, buildings on fire,

and

baseball. (Men can purchase tickets to this Tearjerker for Guys without feeling like saps.) Jim Caviezel stars as police officer John Sullivan, whose father Frank (Dennis Quaid), a fireman, died in a warehouse blaze in 1969, and whose presence is sorely missed by his only son.

Through the power of movies, however (which screenwriter Toby Emmerich credits to sunspots and the northern lights), father and son are magically able to communicate again through Dad's ham radio, which Frank operates in the past while John speaks to him in the present. But they soon learn that it's not nice to fool with the space-time continuum, and by preventing Dad's 1969 death, they've caused the death of

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Mom

, at the hands of a serial killer. How are they to prevent
that
?

As you've probably surmised, *Frequency* attempts to defy genre by being all things to all people. As you also might expect, it doesn't quite work. The logistics of the time-travel scenario are, of course, ridiculous, but so was the plotting in *Fi*
eld of Dreams

. I don't care; as long as the filmmakers treat them matter-of-factly and with conviction, I can go along with just about any set of bizarre circumstances. But

Frequency

's biggest failing is that it throws too damn much into the mix. It's as though Emmerich thought audiences might rebel if he went too far in the guy-bonding department (which, with the communicating-through-time angle, would've been more than enough material for its own movie), and so he threw in Beat the Clock action scenes to spice things up. (Despite plotting lifted from lots of other movies, the one it most closely resembles is

Ghost

, which also suffered from excess Too Much-ness.) That means the father-son bonding doesn't quite have the weight it should, and the serial-killer plot is handled indifferently – neither element adds up to much. And, sad to say, the finale is such a bust – in both plotting and execution – that you leave the theatre completely dry-eyed, and that's a killer for a Male Weepie.

Which is not to say the movie doesn't have incidental pleasures along the way. Caviezel and Quaid both have an impressively earnest gravity (though Quaid's Noo Yawk accent is a bit too studied), Elizabeth Mitchell (as Mom) and Andre Braugher get some nice moments, and occasionally, the film's tricky plotting is ingenious – I loved how the fates of certain characters were determined by the outcome of the Mets' World Series Championship. There are isolated fine moments all throughout the picture, but *Frequency* is, in the end, less than the sum of its parts, one that can't bear the weight of such random, disjointed elements squeezing into a whole.



WHERE THE HEART IS

Where the Heart Is is an example of a film type that, for me, *never* works; the Southern-fried comic melodrama with wacky, oddball caricatures that, through death and suffering, turn out to be human after all. How the hell are we meant to

take

this movie? In the course of the film, pregnant white-trash teen Novalee Nation (Natalie Portman) gets abandoned by her equally white-trash boyfriend at a Wal-Mart, lives there unnoticed for six weeks, gives birth there, becomes a mini-celebrity, befriends a single mom (Ashley Judd) who names her kids after candy bars (!), inherits a great sum of money, becomes an award-winning photographer, romances a local recluse (James Frain), and helps friends through numerous personal crises, becoming Earth Mother to Us All before the age of twenty-one. Based on Billie Letts' Oprah-endorsed book (which should tell you immediately whether or not it's a movie for you), the movie makes

Frequency

look like the model of sanity and logical plotting. I can handle all sorts of time-travel nonsense far easier than characters with unlikely names like Sister Husband and a heinous sub-plot that actually uses child molestation as a source of cheap pathos.

Amazingly, though, those who otherwise be tempted to skip the film – as I was – might still find it worth a look due to its remarkable cast. To say the film has strong female performers is one of the all-time understatements – where else will you see Portman, Judd, Stockard Channing, Joan Cusack, and (for a few brief, fantastic minutes) Sally Field so gloriously chewing the scenery? Actors are suckers for corn-pone, theatrical characters like these, and thank God director Matt Williams assembled this group, because they're all that prevent you from running toward the exits.

Judd, after her dreadful work in *Double Jeopardy*, is back in terrific, utterly endearing form – she's so built for comedy that it would be a shame if she reverted back to hollow action-heroine roles. That astonishing actress Channing provides grace notes and humor all throughout the film, and while Cusack is stuck in a sub-plot that could – and should – have easily been excised from the film, she's so funny and sharp and unique as a talent agent that you can't imagine the movie without her. As for Portman, she might be playing it to “real” for the film's conception of Novalee, but that only speaks well for Portman herself; she's an uncommonly dignified performer, with a beautiful radiant gaze that you can't tear yourself away from.

Where the Heart Is

, as a film experience, is pretty reprehensible, and it's one of the bad jokes of movies that the only way you'll see an ensemble this marvelous is by actually sitting through it.