

Washington Can't Save the Witless "John Q.": Also, "Collateral Damage"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 19 February 2002 18:00



JOHN Q.

In Nick Cassavetes' soapbox-lecture-cum-thriller *John Q.*, Denzel Washington stars as blue-collar worker John Archibald, a middle-aged Chicagoan struggling with tight finances but deeply in love with his wife, Denise (Kimberly Elise), and a great father to their only son, Mike (Daniel E. Smith). While rounding the bases at a little-league game, Mike collapses, and it's revealed that Mike's heart is three times the size it should be; unless the Archibalds can come up with the enormous fee required for a heart transplant, Mike will die. The Archibalds do have health insurance, but because their insurance company recently switched to an HMO (cue the duh-duh-*dun* music), their coverage is no longer sufficient for Mike's operation, and when all of their other money-raising options have been eliminated, John arms himself, takes the hospital's emergency room hostage, and announces that, yes, Mike *will* be getting that transplant.

This is when *John Q.* starts to become embarrassingly bad, but clues to its ineptitude arrive much earlier. During the opening credits, in fact. Director Cassavetes opens his film with a brief prelude of a woman in a shiny new car with, honest to God, pearls dangling off her rear-view mirror, blithely and irresponsibly weaving through traffic and crossing the double-yellow line on a hilly, curvy highway, with operatic music blaring on the soundtrack. Enter the Mack truck. Now, obviously, this sequence has been included to establish that a fresh-from-the-victim heart is out there waiting for Mike. But the snooty subtext of the scene is that this unnamed donor-to-be is so ultra-rich (*pearls on her rear-view mirror!*), and such an elitist snob (with her fancy car and her reckless driving and her *opera* music, for crying out loud!) that she doesn't *deserve* her heart; she thinks she's better than *us*. The class-consciousness of the movie, while undeniably well-intentioned, is pushy and relentless from minute one, and sets up the film's us-versus-them mentality in such broad strokes that I immediately began dreading *John Q.*'s inevitable lectures on how "the system" was destroying us from within. (Which is not to say that *John Q.*

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's message – that the bureaucratic red tape involved with HMOs and insurance companies is insanely convoluted – is an unworthy movie subject. It's a *great* movie subject, but one deserving of more detailed analysis than given here.)

The movie's other major warning sign occurs after Mike has been checked in to the hospital, and it's revealed that Washington's character's name is actually John Q. (for Quincy) Archibald. Perhaps ridiculously, I assumed the film's title was going to be metaphoric – John Q. being an obvious shorthand for John Q. Public, i.e., The Common Man – yet not only is the name literal, when John Q.'s plight becomes a matter of national concern and commentators like the sadly ubiquitous Jay Leno and Larry King begin discussing his case on TV, no one bothers to mention the inherent irony in his name; it's as if the expression "John Q. Public" never existed. It was at this moment I realized that James Kearns' *John Q.* script was going to completely dispense with subtlety and would happily beat its messages to death to make sure we didn't miss a thing. (You might feel a dispiriting Screenwriting 101 twinge in your gut when the hospital's icy, money-obsessed administrator, played by Anne Heche, shows up and reveals her name to be Rebecca *Payne.*)

But back to the emergency room, where *John Q.*'s true idiocies begin. In keeping with the film's parade of clichés, the E.R. is populated by "quirky" caricatures – woman going into labor, nurse on her first day of work, street thug (the hilariously miscast Shawn Hatosy) and his abused girlfriend, et cetera – who you just *know* are going to stand behind their kidnapper by movie's end. Then we have the cops, led by Robert Duvall, struggling to get his mouth around his "Chicagoan" vowels, and Ray Liotta, whose mere presence tells you that this chief of police is going to be morally bankrupt and out-of-touch with the values of decent people like us. And *then* we have the media, personified by one of those not-a-hair-out-of-place TV newscasters who realizes that John Q.'s plight will mean boffo ratings at the expense of taste and truth. You couldn't have the cards more neatly stacked in John Q.'s favor if screenwriter Kearns had the hospital staff tell the Archibalds that they were going to *kill* Mikey at the stroke of midnight.

Were Cassavetes and Kearns so afraid that we *wouldn't* side with the Archibalds that they felt the need to make everyone else in the film the Stupidest Person Alive? If so, they needn't have worried. Denzel Washington is suitably earnest and commanding, Kimberly Elise – largely unseen since 1998's *Beloved* – is wonderfully affecting, particularly when her anger and frustration take a frightening, Lady Macbeth-ish turn, and young Daniel E. Smith is, to put it mildly, cute as hell. With almost nothing

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of substance to work with, this trio creates an engaging, completely believable family, which makes the machinations of the film's plot all the more offensive. Whatever tension and interest *John Q.*

generates comes solely from the work of these three performers (although James Woods comes through with a nicely understated turn as the hospital's cardiologist); they're so touching, in fact, that audiences might be willing to forgive how unbelievably, witlessly predictable *John Q.*

itself actually is. The movie is a classic example of filmmakers not trusting their audience enough to make conclusions on their own; the film ends with a series of pundits extolling the merits of a national health-care initiative, reiterating the point Cassavetes and Kearns make for close to two hours. In case you missed it: We the People, good. HMOs and insurance companies, bad. Is this anyone's idea of a newsflash?



COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Poor Arnold Schwarzenegger, that late-20th Century dinosaur in a 21st Century world. All he wanted to do, I'm guessing, was make an exciting little thriller about a fireman avenging the terrorist-bombing deaths of his wife and kid; then the events of September 11 unfurled, and now his movie, *Collateral Damage*, is being treated as the example of everything that was wrong with American movies, and America in general, with its indifference to the *true*

nature of terrorism. (The movie was briefly shelved after its original release date last autumn.) The movie itself is silly but serviceable – a rote action pic that gives you an occasional jump – but doesn't deserve the ink that's been used discussing it. The film is neither more nor less interesting given our new national consciousness; it's just Arnie, yet again, doing his loveable badass shtick, an act that should have been retired not on September 11, but with the end of the first Bush administration.