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CITY BY THE SEA

If Robert De Niro ever decides to quit acting, I hope he receives retirement benefits from the NYPD. In Michael Caton-Jones's police melodrama *City by the Sea*, De Niro plays Vincent LaMarca, who is, by rough estimate, the 7,000th cop character he has played onscreen in the past two decades.

LaMarca enjoys professional respect and the love of a good woman (Frances McDormand), but he harbors some shameful secrets from his past. When LaMarca was a child, his father was executed for the accidental killing of a baby during a botched kidnapping attempt; this so scarred the young Vincent (we assume) that he eventually abandoned everyone who got close to him, including his estranged wife (Patti LuPone) and his own young son, Joey (played as an adult by James Franco). Now, drug-addicted and aimless in dilapidated Long Beach (the city of the film's title), Joey is wanted for the murders of a fellow junkie and Vincent's partner on the force, and begs his dad for help; Vincent must decide which is more important – being a father or being a cop.

Based on a true story that Mike McAlary shaped into an article for *Esquire*, *City by the Sea* would seem to have all the elements for a punchy melodrama: violence, drugs, twisted family relationships. But the movie itself is almost unbearably banal. Director Jones is a B-grade filmmaker who works with A-grade talent – his résumé includes
Rob Roy
,
The Jackal
, and the De Niro/DiCaprio outing
This Boy's Life
– and he has yet to create a work with visual snap; his scenes all have the same lethargic rhythm, and they're dull to look at. He isn't helped here by screenwriter Ken Hixon's pedantic speechifying. There's absolutely no subtext in this material, and it should be rife with it – the characters' relationships to one another and their situations are spelled out with utter obviousness, and by the time you get to Vincent's and Joey's inevitable, tearful confrontation at the finale, you might want to hide your face; the dialogue is of the "You never loved me!" sort heard when Maury Povich or Sally Jesse Raphael do their reconciliation numbers, and you feel ashamed to be watching.

De Niro also does more than his share in this department. For most of the film he's nearly somnolent, as he often is when playing cops in movies that are beneath him (*Showtime*, *15 Minutes*
,
Flawless
, et cetera, et cetera), but astonishingly, his going-through-the-motions in most of
City by the Sea
is actually
preferable
to the forced histrionics he presents at the finale. Great actor though he is/was, De Niro has certainly given his share of bum performances, yet I've never before felt embarrassed to be watching him; his work in this film's final 10 minutes might represent a career low. As his son, James Franco matches up with De Niro nicely, and there's no denying this young actor's charisma, but he's playing a series of clichés that no actor could overcome and is saddled with a heavy dese-dem-dose accent that Franco seems to have trouble spitting out. As for McDormand, her matter-of-fact puckishness remains endearing, but she has moved so far past playing Generic Girlfriend that you find yourself a bit shocked when you realize, sadly, that that's all she's required to portray here. (The screenwriting for her character is so lazy that, although we continually see her leaving the theatre where the Broadway production of
Follies
is playing, we never learn what it is her character does there – is she an actress or an usherette?) A mixture of the maudlin and the mundane,
City by the Sea
is a humiliating drag; everyone involved should have known better.

SWIMFAN

It would be all too easy to tear *Swimfan* to shreds. The film aspires to be nothing more than a *F atal Attraction*
for the Clearasil set, and a frighteningly specific one at that; in both films, the female psycho,
à la
Glenn Close, initiates a romantic, albeit casual, liaison with our stalwart hero and then becomes eerily possessive, drops in unexpectedly at our hero's domicile, causes the hero's lover to be

hospitalized as the result of an automobile accident, and winds up, at the climax, thrashing about while submerged in water. Add to this dialogue that's at best perfunctory, ludicrous plot holes, and a let's-just-wrap-this-up-and-get-the-hell-out-of-here finale, and you have what should be nothing more than another piece of teen trash from the Hollywood assembly line. But, damn it all, the movie's not bad, and it's certainly preferable to the moribund goings-on of *City by the Sea*
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In *Swimfan* – an awful title, though any riff on *Fatal Attraction* (*Deadly Infatuation*, *Destructive Wonder-What-She-Looks-Like-Naked*
) would be infinitely worse – Jesse Bradford plays Ben Cronin, a high-school swimming champ who falls under the spell of school newbie Madison Bell (Erika Christensen), despite the loving relationship he shares with his girlfriend, Amy (Shiri Appleby). After Ben and Madison share a one-night rendezvous, one that Ben regrets, Madison begins acting The Woman Scorned, which begins with incessant phone calls and e-mails and eventually leads to harassment, threats, and murder. Is any of this sounding familiar?

There's no way to justify *Swimfan* as a *good* movie, but for the first 45 minutes or so, it almost comes off as one. There's a blessed relaxation in the way Ben and his pals interact, and a sweetly realistic tone in Ben's scenes with his mom (Kate Burton) that lets you know immediately that, yes, there actually *was* a director present on the set. His name is John Polson, and even though he's working on a piece of genre garbage, he appears to have some real talent. There's some exquisite sound design and camera placement early in the film – particularly in Ben's and Madison's poolside encounter – that gives
Swimfan
some crackling energy, and he stages a couple of his shock scenes – like Ben's discovery of a corpse while doing laps – with professional aplomb. Polson also guides his two leads to truly winning performances. Jesse Bradford, who was marvelous as the young lead of Steven Soderbergh's 1993 triumph
King of the Hill
, has grown into a terrifically likable young actor with an offhand charm; despite
Swimfan
's increasingly loony plot convolutions, he keeps the film grounded. And Erika Christensen is an absolute hoot. Based on her inspired druggie performance in
Traffic
(another Soderbergh film ... hmmm, coincidence?), we knew she was talented, but who imagined she could be so funny? Christensen plays her mini-Close with quietly deranged fervor, and with a comic confidence that eluded Sarah Michelle Gellar in
Cruel Intentions
and Alicia Silverstone in
The Crush

; every time she grinned mischievously, I giggled happily.
Swimfan
is crap, of course, but for long stretches, its director and stars make it surprisingly enjoyable crap.