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The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys

A ThinkFilm release of an Initial Entertainment Group presentation of an Egg Pictures production in association with Trilogy Entertainment Group. Produced by Jodie Foster, Meg LeFauve, Jay Shapiro. Executive producers, Graham King, David A. Jones, John Watson, Pen Densham. Co-producer, Tim Harbert. Directed by Peter Care. Screenplay, Jeff Stockwell, based on the novel by Chris Fuhrman.

Tim Sullivan - Kieran Culkin
Margie Flynn - Jena Malone
Francis Doyle - Emile Hirsch
Father Casey - Vincent D'Onofrio
Sister Assumpta - Jodie Foster
Wade - Jake Richardson
Joey Scalisi - Tyler Long

By DAVID ROONEY

Originally slated for Sundance 2000 but pulled when animated sequences weren't completed in time, "The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys" arrives in surprisingly decent shape for a film that's been gathering dust for almost a year. But without the imaginative, visually exciting animated segs by "Spawn" creator Todd McFarlane that caused the delays, this adaptation of the late Chris Fuhrman's novel would be a very standard Hollywood-style rites-of-passage tale about the turbulence, recklessness and unbridled imagination of youth, which feels like it's sacrificed some thematic weight en route from page to screen.

Slated for domestic release in June via nascent distrib ThinkFilm, the drama is evocative and absorbing despite not fully delivering on the material's potential. It stands as a solid feature debut for British music video and commercials director Peter Care that should obtain modest theatrical visibility before receiving a wider blessing as a home entertainment title.

Produced by Jodie Foster and Meg LeFauve (with Jay Shapiro) through their Egg Pictures stable, and adapted by Jeff Stockwell, the film's chief shortcoming is perhaps its failure to convey a stronger, more atmospheric sense of the repressive 1970s Catholic school environment that breeds the titular boys' rebellion and wild flights of fancy.

The underpopulated Southern school appears to have a staff of two, one of whom, Sister Assumpta, is played by Foster in one of her less incisive performances. Given the stern sobriety the actress has brought to other roles, Foster is a surprisingly disappointing fit for the brittle, authoritarian, peg-legged nun, never quite locking down the character as she juggles spiritual and disciplinarian missions with her genuine concern for the kids and their endangered souls. A mild Irish accent that comes and goes doesn't help.

And despite the title, the boys are seen assisting at Mass only in one early scene, their own feelings on religion and spirituality never really coming into play. Their homelife also is inadequately sketched in only the briefest of family scenes.

Best friends Tim (Kieran Culkin) and Francis (Emile Hirsch) and their buddies have a rich fantasy life of good and evil, superheroes and villains, which they vividly flesh out by collaborating on a violent, sexually charged comic book. Their animated alter-egos do battle with the boys' nemesis Nunzilla, a demonic, black-cloaked motorcycle-riding depiction of their teacher Sister Assumpta. The most accomplished artist of the group, Francis feels the pangs of first love for troubled schoolmate Margie (Jena Malone), whose own dark secrets and sense of guilt create obstacles in their blossoming romance.

Depicting Francis as a powerful hulk with shooting vines for hands, Tim as an "all bone, no bullshit" skeleton boy, and Margie as imperiled babe Sorcerella, the superbly executed animation sequences start out as roughly drawn sketches then bloom into a fully developed cartoon universe. While they at times seem wedged into the action rather than seamlessly integrated, they provide a darkly energized parallel narrative, injecting some adrenaline to lift the boys' more subdued live-action misadventures.

These range from the prankish theft of the school's statue of St. Agatha to an ill-planned revenge plot against Sister Assumpta when she confiscates the incriminating comic book and threatens expulsion. But the boys' attempt to drug and kidnap a cougar from the local animal reserve to tear up the nun's office and destroy the evidence results in a tragedy that will indelibly mark Francis' life.

Director Care maintains a delicate tone, shifting confidently between humor, gentle intensity in the romantic scenes and pathos in the sorrowful conclusion; and shows a firm guiding hand with the young actors.

Culkin brings plenty of irreverent spark to his character and Malone -- in a role with parallels to those she played in "Bastard Out of Carolina" and "Donnie Darko" -- soulfully communicates the aching confusion of youth. But the most nuanced, sensitive performance comes from impressive newcomer Hirsch, conveying strength of character, thoughtfulness and vulnerability.

Vincent D'Onofrio also provides some interesting quirks as the rough-edged school priest, who seems entirely uncertain of having all the answers.

Live-action scenes are shot with nimble grace by up-and-coming d.p. Lance Acord ("Being John Malkovich").

Camera (FotoKem color), Lance Acord; editor, Chris Peppe; music, Marco Beltrami, Joshua Homme; production designer, Gideon Ponte; costume designer, Marie France; sound (Dolby Digital), Carl Rudisill; animator, Todd McFarlane; animation producer, Terry Fitzgerald; additional animation producers, Eric Radomski, Mike Wolf; assistant director, Scott Cameron; casting, Laray Mayfield. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Premieres), Jan. 18, 2002. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 105 MIN.

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