

ENTERTAINMENT

'A Civil Action' a flawed, but accurate portrayal of the justice system

By Tammy D. McMahan
Special to Sentinel-Voice

What is the value of human life? The film *A Civil Action* provides answers that are disturbing, but honest, in terms of the high stakes litigation played out on the screen. Although the major characters are not fully developed or relegated to caricatures, the drama manages to be compelling.

A Civil Action is based upon Jonathan Harr's bestselling nonfiction story of the same title. The film introduces us to Jan Schlichtmann (John Travolta), a real-life personal injury attorney, who coolly evaluates the worth of plaintiffs based upon their age, race and gender. He concludes that a dead child is worth least of all. Schlichtmann revels in his comfortable law practice which consists of high-paying settlements, not arduous trials.

Schlichtmann is giving his spiel on how he feels the pain of his clients on a radio talk show when Ann Anderson (Kathleen Quinlan), calls and inquires why he has not moved on her case. Anderson is a resident of Woburn, Massachusetts. The residents of the town have suffered through the death of 12 children from leukemia within 15 years. Anderson, the mother of one of the dead children, is determined to find out who caused her son to die and get an apology.

At first, the greedy Schlichtmann has no interest because he sees no deep pocket from which to take millions. However, he is drawn into the case when he discovers that two Woburn plants are subsidiaries of two major corporations, W.R. Grace and Beatrice Foods. He sees dollar signs. During the course of the litigation, Schlichtmann wrangles a most formidable legal opponent, Jerome Facher (Robert Duvall), whose distracted, folksy mannerisms belie an incredibly sharp, cunning legal mind.

Ultimately, Schlichtmann's view of his clients, in fact, life in general, is forever changed. He sees that money cannot measure

the true value of precious human life.

Travolta enlivens pre-Woburn case Schlichtmann with a kind of lovable greed and smarminess as seen in Michael Douglas' portrayal of Gordon Gekko in *Wall Street*. However, Travolta doesn't ably show the psychological damage that Schlichtmann had to undergo as he endures this David and Goliath legal struggle. The Woburn case robs him of everything, his practice, his reputation and even his possessions. Travolta weakly relates the emotional trauma with blase confidence and one overblown violent outburst.

Although Duvall is interesting at times as the quirky, but fiercely intelligent Beatrice Foods attorney, his mannerisms grow tiresome and predictable. Duvall seems as if he's replaying his *Deep Impact* character with a nasty twist.

The supporting actors are generally relegated to one dimensional performances. Kathleen Quinlan is the grieving mother who sits in the back of the courtroom. Tony Shalhoub and Zeljko Ivanek are the concerned law firm partners who look about nervously as their practice goes down in flames. The usually phenomenal Macy gives a banal performance as the firm's lawyer-accountant who experiences a mental breakdown due to the Woburn case.

Despite flawed acting, the story of *A Civil Action* is compelling. The film shows that moral, legal and financial accountability in complex litigation isn't easily discerned. Moreover, even if a party is legally determined to be responsible, good people will continue to suffer injustices.

Furthermore, the film takes a decidedly un-Hollywood, but realistic, turn with Schlichtmann who becomes a better human being, but he is also bankrupt.

A Civil Action may not be the best legal drama you'll ever see, but the film will make you think about the value of human life.

Dupri

(Continued from Page 10) will head All Out records as So So Def tries to expand its impact in the industry.

"Me and Puff didn't ever discuss a label deal," says Mase. "Me and J.D. spoke about it one time, hypothetically, and then after a couple of months we just thought that it was a good idea. I had a lot of ideas, and I felt with J.D. I could accomplish what I had to do," he says.

"I look at it as another eye for me. I can't see everything and see everywhere," Dupri said. "I'm based in Atlanta and he's up here in Harlem, so he might see the next Michael Jackson at the Apollo (Theater). If he puts him on his label, and I'm a part of that, so that's how it goes down."

Even as his solo effort creates chart hits, Dupri

remains devoted to his work as a producer and a creator for other artists. He promises not to let his own success bypass opportunities to work with the long list of singers hoping he will create some magic for them.

"It's cool with me being an artist, but I know I'm a producer, first and foremost," Dupri says. "So as long as I remember that ... I should be all right. The artist thing, that's just one particular part of me."

Ladies

(Continued from Page 10)

When her agents told her "*The Redd Foxx Show*" was looking for a "40's style jazz singer," Payton assured them, "that's what I do best" and wound up doing more than a dozen episodes of the show including seven as Foxx's wife in a recurring skit.

Those appearances and other guest starring roles led to a recurring role on the ABC sitcom, "*Perfect Strangers*," where she portrayed Harriette Winslow, the tart tongued elevator operator, which served as the springboard for her own sitcom, "*Family Matters*."

After portraying the matriarch of the family for nine seasons, Payton decided to leave the show in late 1997 to pursue other avenues of interests which led to the recording of her debut jazz CD "*Southern Shadows*" ... and that's Hollywood this time!!

Until the next time, Lanier.

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