

Movie Review

Side Effects (2013)

by

Stanley Goldstein, Ph.D.

www.drstanleygoldstein.com

doc3612@yahoo.com

Though containing excellent acting and an intriguing plot, *Side Effects* is limited by its inaccurate portrayal of psychiatrists though, admittedly, psychiatrists *do* make errors, *may* prescribe dangerous medications and, *rarely*, have sex with their patients. But the doctors in *Side Effects* are so dreadful that viewers may find themselves rooting for the murderer. The fuller description of characters might have turned this film into significant theater.

Side Effects begins with a man being released from prison after serving four years for insider trading. His wife visits him faithfully during his imprisonment but later kills him, allegedly while under the influence of a new psychotropic medication. Earlier, after a feigned suicide attempt, she meets her latest psychiatrist in the Emergency Room. Following the murder, his wife and colleagues reject him and the state opens an investigation. Becoming obsessed with restoring his reputation, the doctor behaves unprofessionally and illegally.

Though the goal of commercial movies is entertainment and not education, the film makes several good points: that psychotropic drugs are too widely prescribed and that doctors are improperly induced (read bribed) by drug companies to recommend them. The distortions of psychiatric practice include:

1. The psychiatrist asking few questions of the patient during their initial interview though the woman's cognitive symptoms, before she drove into a wall, might well have been medication induced or neurological in nature.

2. The psychiatrist, appearing disinterested and unpersuasive, describes his conduct with the patient to the state's investigator, but *without* the presence of his lawyer which no real doctor would do.

Moreover, the murderer's motive, provided late in the film, isn't consistent with the depravity of her act. You don't remain committed to an absent spouse for four years and then kill him, particularly when he's kind and considerate and the act is deliberate not impulsive. Sociopaths aren't known for their patience.

Because judgments of art are inherently personal, my evaluation of *Side Effects* may be unfair. That I was heavily engaged with the characters is a tribute to the acting. But, because of the opening scenes, I had expected for the film to portray heroism, as with the reformed gunfighter

of *Shane* or the abandoned sheriff of *High Noon*, a lone person seeking humanity and justice in an imperfect world. Yet *Side Effects* unveils no honor since the behavior of the doctors is only a little less detestable than that of the murderer, and of her criminal husband who had been seeking a new “business” with a past fellow inmate at the time of his death.

Side Effects portrays a society which, while true to segments of ours, is a world where none would choose to live. To experience that you must watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, one of today's most loved movies despite its commercial failure in 1946. Here, an angel helps a despairing man by showing what his town would have been had he never existed, the courage of ordinary life. *Side Effects* contains no angel nor any character worthy of their intervention.

The noted screenwriter, William Goldman, said that “nobody knows nothing” about how to make a successful movie. Still, as can occur in both movies and life, sometimes heroes and long shots do win big.

Copyright ©2014 by Stanley Goldstein. All rights reserved.