

MOVIE REVIEW

The Vivid, Emotionally Truthful Lives of 'Altar Boys'

The tricky blend of live action and animation imaginatively tells the tale of 1970s teens learning about the world's darker realities.

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The young teens of the beautiful, emotion-charged "The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys" face perils real and imagined--although not of the type raised by the current furor over pedophile priests. Instead, this imaginative film, adapted from Chris Fuhrman's celebrated 1994 coming-of-age novel, suggests that life may be full of wonders but it is also a terrifically risky business.

These young people discover, in their initial collision of innocence with experience, that part of growing up is having to acknowledge that life is fragile and ever uncertain, its dark undertow lurking never too far beneath an often deceptively placid surface. Francis Doyle (Emile Hirsch) and his best friend, Tim Sullivan (Kieran Culkin), are in their early teens, living in an idyllic small town in the 1970s, the kind with tree-lined avenues and spacious old homes with inviting front porches. They and their pals attend the local Catholic school, where Vincent D'Onofrio's Father Casey is a firm but mellow presence. Sister Assumpta (Jodie Foster) is another matter. She is a scathingly strict disciplinarian, her rigidity emphasized by her prosthetic left leg. She is fiercely devout but totally lacking in joy. Hellfire and damnation are painfully palpable to her, and she sees it as her solemn duty to prepare her students to cope with a troubled world in a manner designed to incur their loathing.

Francis, Tim and their pals, like many 14- and 15-year-olds, escape into the fantasy world of comic books, but Francis, a gifted artist, takes it a step further. He writes and draws a narrative in which he and his friends become giant muscular hulks, taking on the villainous Sister Nunzilla and her sisterly

horde. They're trying to help the beautiful Sorcerella in her struggle to unite a magical sword and pearl to bring her derelict, abandoned kingdom back to life.

It is a special triumph that animator Todd McFarlane has brought Francis' comic book fantasy to vivid life with such wit and style, and that director Peter Care (a prize-winning maker of music videos and commercials), writers Jeff Stockwell and Michael Petroni, and cinematographer Lance Acord make the transitions between live action and animation so remarkably fluid and natural-seeming. What makes the mesh so effective is that Francis' fantasy narrative shifts gears from time to time to reflect the twists and turns in his daily life. Most important is that he and Jena Malone's pretty but troubled Margie Flynn are drawn to each other in what is Francis' first rush of emotional and sexual attraction. Margie and the secret that imprisons her unconsciously become the source of inspiration for Sorcerella and her plight.

There's a streak of prankishness in the boys that goes pretty far, yet so rich and engaging is this film and its people that we never lose sympathy for them, even for Sister Assumpta, who means well yet feels compelled to rip apart "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," a book of poetry and illustrations by Romantic poet William Blake, Francis' idol, whom she labels "a dangerous thinker." (No wonder she feels this way: Blake ends the book with the statement that "every thing that lives is holy.") Sister Assumpta represents a bold departure for Foster, the film's co-producer, who shows us the fear and vulnerability that the nun desperately tries to hide.

Hirsch and Culkin, and Jake Richardson and Tyler Long as their friends, all register as real teenagers in the throes of discovery of self and the world. Hirsch's Francis is the central figure, not only for his talent and imagination, but also for the grounding strength of his solid, normal family life. Tim's parents fight constantly, and Culkin shows us that Tim has a sense of reality's grimness and a streak of recklessness that exceeds Francis' experience and feelings; the same goes for Malone's Margie. D'Onofrio's Father Casey understands that the boys are caught in the tug of war between the lure of rebellion and the expectations of responsibility.

The look and feel of the film is entirely beguiling. It is deliberately not a period piece, heavy with dated styles and fads, but instead evokes a sense of timelessness. In keeping with this approach, Marco Beltrami's score is evocative rather than nostalgic, and a pair of bell-bottoms is not to be found among designer Marie France's low-key costumes.

They have permeated their film with the spirit of William Blake, and, like the poet's great works, "The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys" leaves us with the feeling of the inevitable, inescapable intermingling of good and evil.

MPAA rating: R, for language, sexual content and youth substance abuse. Times guidelines: The film is for mature audiences and is too intense for children.

'The Dangerous Lives
of Altar Boys'

Emile Hirsch...Francis Doyle

Kieran Culkin...Tim Sullivan

Jena Malone...Margie Flynn

Jodie Foster...Sister Assumpta

Vincent D'Onofrio...Father Casey

A THINKfilm release of an Initial Entertainment Group presentation of an Egg Pictures production in association with Trilogy Entertainment Group. Director Peter Care. Producers Meg LeFauve, Jay Shapiro and Jodie Foster. Executive producers Graham King and David A. Jones; John Watson and Pen Densham. Screenplay by Jeff Stockwell and Michael Petroni, based upon the book by Chris Fuhrman. Cinematographer Lance Acord. Animator Todd McFarlane. Animator producers McFarlane and Terry Fitzgerald. Editor Chris Peppe. Music Marco Beltrami. Costumes Marie France. Production designer Gideon Ponte. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

At selected theaters.

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