

Kerns, Davison face 'Desperate Choices'

Witherspoon excels in pivotal role

By Steven Alan McGaw
 "This is a very 'small' movie in a way," says Joanna Kerns of her latest telefilm, "about an issue that isn't hitting the big headlines, but about the way the illness of a child hits a family, the various ways. I think it's a very well-rounded piece."

Kerns joins Bruce Davison (*Longtime Companion*) and Reese Witherspoon (*Man in the Moon*) in *Desperate Choices: To Save My Child*, airing Monday, Oct. 5, on NBC.

Davison and Kerns star as Richard and Mary Ellen "Mel" Robbins, a successful couple with two children: 7-year-old Willy (Joseph Mazzeo) and 15-year-old Cassie (Witherspoon), Richard's daughter from his first marriage. Life seems to be going well for the Robbins. Mel is a popular local TV personality, while Richard has a solid career as a contractor. Shy Willy is adjusting to the rigors of first grade, and outgoing, attractive Cassie is a good student and a determined player on her school's

coed football team.

A puzzling fainting spell alarms Cassie's coach, and her parents take her in for an examination. The diagnosis is devastating: Cassie has leukemia, and her only chance for long-term survival is a bone-marrow transplant. Richard and Mel learn that marrow is difficult to match and only Willy is indicated by test to be an acceptable donor.

Despite her love for Cassie, Mel refuses to sign the necessary papers okaying Willy as donor. She has reason to believe the boy is allergic to anesthetic. "What if we lose both of them?," Mel asks Richard, and their disagreement threatens to tear their marriage apart.

"In a way, they're both right," Kerns says. "And both wrong. Life is that way — messy. Things aren't black and white."

The movie skillfully examines the complex questions raised in the story, including Richard's fear that Mel cares less for Cassie because she is a step-child, and the not-insignificant point that Willy's fate is debated by everyone but Willy himself.

Kerns is warm and engaging in a role many viewers may find unsympathetic. "I took the part

because of that," she says, stressing the distance between this character and Maggie Seaver, the smiling, can-do mom of ABC's long-running *Growing Pains*. "I don't want to sanitize myself," Kerns explains. "always playing good guys."

Thanks to his sensitive, layered portrayal, audiences will relate to Davison as the emotionally torn father, and Witherspoon delivers a powerful performance as the stricken teen. Mazzeo is okay, if a little too cute, as Willy. Bruce McGill and Jeremy Sisto lend fine support, respectively, as Richard's sympathetic attorney and Cassie's would-be boyfriend.

Desperate Choices is a laudable effort, mostly for its performances and the complexity of the story. One wishes, however, for a little less hokum in the dialogue. A story as powerful as this needs no excess of sentimentality.

STAR NOTES

Flanery enjoys playing globe-trotting hero

By Suzanne Gill
 When it comes to heartthrobs, fans want to know important things like, "What does he eat for breakfast?" In the case of Sean Patrick Flanery, the answer is Cream of Wheat — a good, stick-to-the-ribs choice for a globe-trotting adventurer.

Flanery is the principal lead in *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, airing Monday nights on ABC, playing the teenage Indy in George Lucas' history-action series.

Flanery is some years older than the character he plays, but just as wide-eyed, enjoying on-location shoots from North Carolina to Prague, his favorite European city. Despite the travel, he's still in touch with old friends at home in Houston, where he gets around town in a "20-year-old (BMW) 2002."

Though he was recently named to a "50 most beautiful people" list, Flanery frankly says he isn't popular enough to be mobbed on the streets, and he still answers his fan mail — from parents, kids and college students — himself.

As for his own idols, Flanery says he has added several, including Albert Schweitzer, to the list since the series began. Asked which historical character he would most like to encounter in an upcoming episode, Flanery knows instantly: "I'd like to meet Baron Manfred von Richthofen — the Red Baron. You know, that'd be kind of a cool story — World War I, flying aces and stuff like that." *— S. A. GILL*

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