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GUIDE TO THE MOVIES

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MOVIES

Duvall, Jones make best out of 'A Family Thing'

BY JOHN MONAGHAN
SPECIAL WRITER

In "A Family Thing" Robert Duvall discovers that the woman he's been calling "mom" for the past 60 years isn't related to him at all. A detailed letter, delivered after her death, describes how she raised him as her own after her philandering husband made a black servant girl pregnant.

His real mother died in child birth, the letter goes on to say, but she left behind another boy, Ray. Intent on following the woman's last wishes, he sets out for Chicago to make amends with the half-brother he didn't know he had.

That he movie doesn't really know what to do with this clever premise isn't half as important as the mood it creates. Like the Paul Newman movie "Nobody's Fool" from a few years back, it has a vivid sense of place filled with some powerful actors.

Much of the pleasure of "Family Thing" comes in the first half hour where Duvall introduces us to Earl, his baseball-cap wearing good old boy, proprietor of an Arkansas rent-it shop. When someone complains because he's

withheld a deposit, Earl simply locks him in the shop and heads home.

After a painful, death-defying scene with his mother and a confrontation with the father that got him into this mess, Earl heads for the Windy City. A fish out of water, he tangles with carjackers and loses his truck, forced to call upon the brother who wants nothing to

Then the movie begins to tread water and you're left with nothing more than a dramatic version of "The Odd Couple." Arguments cause one or the other to storm away before they soon find a common ground: both served in Korea, it turns out, and even met during childhood.

Though director Richard Pearce practically stamps "IRON-ONY" in bold letters across certain scenes, the movie resorts only occasionally to cheap sentimentalism. This usually comes in the form of the men's Aunt T. (Irene P. Hall), a crusty but lovable old blind woman who lives with Ray and keeps his bitterness in check.

Ray's son Virgil (Michael Beach) is another story. Correctly pegged by Earl as a boy with a

chip on his shoulder, Virgil had been shot at pro football before irreversibly injuring his knee early in his career. Now he's the bitter father of two who sleeps on the couch and won't give Earl the time of day.

Though the movie paints a picture of Chicago's older neighborhoods and abandoned buildings, it works best in those early scenes back in Earl's Arkansas. Garage doors open, with dad hosing down the muddy bulldozer tires, it's the kind of place you don't usually see in movies, the wide screen revealing every detail.

Ultimately you go to "A Family Thing" to witness two of Hollywood's greatest character actors given the time and breathing space to bring substantial characters to life. Sometimes that's enough.

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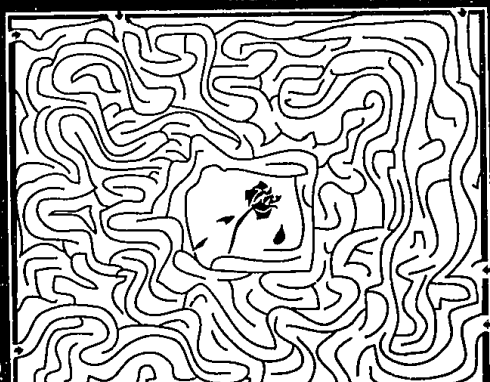



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Drama: Aunt T. (Irma P. Hall), Earl (Robert Duvall), Virgil (Michael Beach) and Ray (James Earl Jones) attempt to uncover the past and move toward the future in *United Artists' "A Family Thing."*

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