

Haunting 'In the Bedroom' is one of year's best films

BY CHRISTY LEAHRE
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NEW YORK (AP) - There's been a ton of Oscar buzz for "In the Bedroom" and for its stars, Sissy Spacek and Tom Wilkinson, whose performances earned them a Special Jury Prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival. Every bit of praise they've received is deserved.

The film is a stunning feature debut from director Todd Field, best known until now as the pianist who introduces Tom Cruise's character to a secret world of dark orgies in "Eyes Wide Shut."

Spacek - a five-time Oscar nominee who won for 1980's "Coal Miner's Daughter" - and Wilkinson provide an achingly honest portrayal of parents whose marriage nearly collapses under the strain of their son's murder.

Based on a short story by Andre Dubus, "In the Bedroom" accurately depicts how people grieve in different ways. It's also a fascinating exploration of the steps ordinary people take under extraordinary circumstances.

Frank Fowler (Nick Stahl), an architecture student home for the summer and working as a lobsterman in the small, coastal town of Camden, Maine, is having a fling with Natalie (Marisa Tomei), an older, divorced mother of two.

His mother, Ruth, (Spacek) is the local choral music teacher; his father, Matt (Wilkinson), is a town doctor. Their days are long and idyllic, filled with cookouts and Little League games.

But Natalie's ex-husband, Richard (William Mapother), part of the prominent family that owns the town cannery, feels jealous and threatened by his ex-wife's new lover. After several increasingly contentious confrontations, Richard shows up at Natalie's house one day and shoots Frank to death.

Shocking as the moment is, it's not really what "In the Bedroom" is about. The film follows the ways in which the Fowlers' seemingly strong bond dissolves after an integral part of their lives is ripped from them.

Ruth wants to sell; Matt tries to console with her through small talk and tiny compliments. But they end up withdrawing further and further from each other - she with mind-numbing late-night TV and chain-smoking, he with yard work and sleeping pills.

When they do finally speak, in an argument that is so brutally honest, it's agonizing to watch; they unleash decades of blame and resentment that perhaps they never knew they had. The scene has a raw intensity.

From the very beginning, though, Field's pacing provides subtle tension, even during seemingly happy moments - the rustling of wind through the

trees, breaking the silence on a lazy afternoon; Natalie's tiny shrieks that simultaneously sound frisky and frightened as her young lover chases her through a meadow.

Field, who co-wrote the script, has created a thorough sense of place that New Englanders will appreciate; he spent time growing up in Maine, and it shows, from the reserved way the Fowlers' friends and neighbors react to Frank's murder to the cast's crackle on the speakers from the AM sports radio station; a can of Moxie, a brand of soda that's popular in New England, is visible on a refrigerator shelf when Ruth goes for a midnight snack.

And all the accents are believable and not overdone - especially Wilkinson's. (The British actor, who co-starred in "The Full Monty," immersed himself in the Maine lobstering culture to prepare for the role.)

Despite the stars' strong performances, the supporting players must not be ignored. During his brief time on screen, Stahl is bright-eyed, charming and magnetic. Tomei, in the best work of her inconsistent career, is palpably shattered.

"In the Bedroom" is gorgeous. It is haunting. It may just be the best movie of the year.

A Miramax Films release, "In the Bedroom" runs 122 minutes.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Opened Tuesday, Dec. 25

IN THE BEDROOM
 The story of a doctor from Maine and his wife who teaches a high school chorus group. They are forced to struggle with the grief and emotional bludgeoning that comes their way when their son becomes involved with an older woman. Stars Tom Wilkinson, Sissy Spacek, Nick Stahl, Marisa Tomei, Justin Ashtforth, Karen Allen, William Mapother, Celia Weston, William Wise. Directed by Todd Field.



The Greatest:
 Will Smith plays flamboyant heavy-weight champ Muhammad Ali in the new Michael Mann film bio 'Ali,' which opened Christmas Day.

THE SHIPPING NEWS
 A struggling newspaper writer, Quoyie, returns to the small fishing town in Newfoundland where his family has long lived in, with his two young daughters, after a traumatizing experience with their mother. Stars Kevin Spacey, Julianne Moore, Carlo Blanchett, Dame Judi Dench, Scott Glenn, Rysa Hanks, Peter Postlewaite and Jason Ebert. Directed by Lasse Hallstrom.

ALI
 Cassius Clay (Will Smith) was a smart-talking, fast-stepping ball of fire. In the ring, and out, who lit up professional sports in the 1960's, eventually dropping his slave name and becoming Muhammad Ali, and refusing to go to Vietnam. Featured players include Will Smith, Michael Benni, Giancarlo Esposito, Jamie Foxx and Jada Pinkett Smith.

IMPOSTER
 Based on Philip K. Dick's 1953 short story.

This futuristic drama tells of a time when Earth is at war with and alien race. The action turns on the character of Spence O'Hann (Gary Sinise), one of many scientists researching new weapons that could defeat the enemy. Arrested by the secret service and taken to the moon, Spence is told he is a robot, planted on Earth by the aliens. What follows is a journey of self-discovery in which the question is posed: "Am I human? Or am I just programmed to believe I am human?" Featured among the ensemble are Madeleine Stowe, Vincent D'Onofrio, Tony Shalhoub and Nikki Pfaier.

Scheduled to open Friday, Dec. 28

CHARLOTTE GRAY
 This is the story of Charlotte Gray, a Scottish woman who joins the French Resistance during World War II in an effort to find her RAF pilot lover who was shot down in

France. Along with her, she has an affair with a French resistance fighter. Stars Cate Blanchett, Billy Crudup, Michael Gough and Rupert Penry-Jones. Directed by Gillian Armstrong.

BLACK HAWK DOWN
 The story centers on the harrowing true account of a group of elite U.S. soldiers sent to Mogadishu, Somalia in October 1993 as part of a U.N. peacekeeping operation. Their mission: to abduct several top lieutenants of a Somali warlord as part of a strategy to quell the civil war that is tearing away at the country. The carefully planned mission goes terribly wrong, resulting in the U.S. military's single biggest firefight since Vietnam. Featured among the ensemble are Josh Hartnett, Tom Sizemore, Ewan McGregor, Ron Eldard and Jeremy Piven.

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