

Medicine on the big and small screen

No one notices: *One True Thing*

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One True Thing

Starring Meryl Streep, Renee Zellweger, William Hurt.

Directed by Carl Franklin.

Monarch Pictures release September 1998; Rated R.

Running time 127 minutes.

Reviewed by Lester D. Friedman, PhD

Sometimes I find it difficult to figure out why a particular film fails to find an audience. Take the case of *One True Thing*, a project that must have struck its proponents as *One Sure Thing*. With a cast featuring Meryl Streep (nominated for an 11th Oscar), William Hurt, and Renee Zellweger, a script based on Anna Quindlen's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, a soundtrack composed by Carole King and Carole Bayer Sager featuring songs by Bette Midler, and the guiding hand of an experienced director like Carl Franklin, it seems hard to imagine how it could flop. Yet it did. Greeted by a series of lukewarm reviews and sporting a production budget of \$30 million, the film's domestic gross of \$23, 245, 840 consigned it to the status of box office under performer and brushed it into cinema history's dustbin. It deserves better.

In the hands of lesser artists, *One True Thing* might

well have degenerated into unadulterated melodrama. However, the film manages to tread a precarious line that mostly avoids this slippage, while it confronts complex family dynamics and serious ethical issues. At its heart, *One True Thing* is a family story told in flashbacks from the daughter's point of view. Called home by her father (Hurt), an egotistical college English professor, to take care of her dying mother Kate (Streep), Ellen Gulden (Zellweger), an ambitious, twenty-something reporter abandons her budding career and forsakes her current boyfriend (Nicky Katt) to accede to his wishes. Throughout her life, Ellen has idolized her charismatic father, valuing his scholarly accomplishments, such as winning a National Book Award, and basking in his students' adoration of him. Conversely, she dismisses her mother simply as a typical housewife whose mundane activities revolve around domestic routines and community activities. Ellen constantly struggles to capture her father's approval while desperately trying to avoid replicating her mother's seemingly commonplace life. Yet, when she returns to her small hometown to assist her mother during an increasingly gruesome battle with cancer, and to allow her father's life to continue with only minimal interruptions, she finds

herself slowly forced to assume the monotonous tasks her mother can no longer physically accomplish, including tedious chores like cleaning the house, doing the laundry, and cooking the meals.

One True Thing operates on multiple levels of sophistication and weaves together various narrative strands. On its most basic level, it's a mystery: did either the daughter or the father contribute to, or even cause, Kate's death by administering an overdose of morphine pills? This disturbing question lingers over the entire course of the film, even after we think we know its answer. Tied to it, the film raises the thorny issue of assisted suicide for a desperate loved one undergoing intense and unremitting pain. Kate's increasingly debilitating illness reverberates profoundly in the lives of her husband and daughter. We watch this vibrant woman slowly fall apart and cannot help but wonder if anyone should be forced to endure such a long road of anguish and agony. George mirrors what many in the audience must be feeling when he says: "Nobody should have to live like that."

One True Thing also explores the intricate relationships between one's personal and professional lives, particularly when the demands of one clash with those of the other. What commitments does a child "owe" an aging parent? How much of a child's life can, or should, be sacrificed on the altar of parental obligations? Some critics read Kate's sentiments about her home life as retrograde, particularly when she tells her disillusioned daughter:

You make concessions when you're married a long time that you don't believe you'll make when you're beginning. When you're young, you say, "Oh, I'll never tolerate this or that or the other thing." But time goes by, darling and you look at your husband, and no he's not the person you thought he was. But he's your life. And the kids and the house and everything that you do is built around him. And that's your life. That's your history too.

Later, however, Kate stresses choice, be that to take on the role of homemaker or to seek out a more public career. Implicitly rejecting George's definition of admirable behavior—"a man who pursues excellence and nothing less"—she tells Ellen: "It's so much easier to choose to love the things that you have, and you have so much, instead of always yearning for what you're missing, or what it is you're imagining you're missing." Most importantly, by assuming her mother's domestic chores during this traumatic time,

Ellen slowly realizes the extent that Kate sacrificed herself to keep her family life running smoothly, but that it yielded rewards and pleasures as well. Concomitant with this emergent respect and increasing affection for her mother, Kate discovers the gaping character flaws in her beloved father, including an unwillingness to modify his life as he totally disrupts hers, and his failures as a writer.

At times, *One True Thing* wrenches your emotions. A scene where an increasingly feeble and balding Kate allows Ellen to drag her out of the bathtub and then begs her daughter to help her die remains permanently etched in my mind. So, too, an equally disturbing segment when an enraged Ellen finally confronts George in a local café. She asks if he procrastinated taking Kate to the doctor because "you didn't want your world disrupted. Because you needed her to keep your life running smoothly?" then chases him down the street yelling furiously, "Why won't you participate in the most important thing that has happened in your life?" But, for the most part, the film eschews such histrionics for more subtle revelations, some about hearth and home, some about family ordeals behind their veneer of public civility, and some about how to handle the suffering and death of a loved one.

One True Thing may not have been a box office hit, but it is as movie not to be missed.

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