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Fathers Figure

Affliction

Directed and written by Paul Schrader
From the novel by Russell Banks
A Lions Gate release

BY J. HOBERMAN

So the day before New Year's Eve, my candidate for the best-directed Hollywood movie and least enticing title of 1998

anachronism. Our antihero wanders around town nursing a monstrous toothache, muttering to himself that he's a whipped dog who just might bite back, but his real affliction is the legacy

college history professor living somewhere near Boston), stumbling onto some sort of real estate scam orchestrated by his oily boss (Holmes Osborne).

Wade absorbs a lot of punishment

but, in attempting to justify himself by avenging a crime, he's a lot closer to Travis Bickle than he is to Jake LaMotta (or Jesus) in the Schrader gallery of masculine archetypes. Ignoring the reality principle, whether it's embodied by a freezing farmhouse or a divorce lawyer in a wheelchair, Wade can't prevent himself from turning into his father—as much as he hates him. If anything, each attempt to forestall the transformation brings him that much closer.

Did I mention how well-constructed *Affliction* is? Disaster has been lurking all movie long but things fall apart with a frightening suddenness. At the very moment when Schrader orchestrates a tracking shot to underscore Wade's bereftness, Glen comes chuckling out of the family farmhouse like a bad dream: "I love you, you mean sonofabitch." *Affliction's* ending reminds



Life-battered: Spacek and Nolte brace themselves.

sneaks into town as volatile and vulnerable as its befuddled antihero. *Affliction*, cagily adapted by writer-director Paul Schrader from Russell Banks's 1989 novel, is as chilly a spectacle as you're likely to see. It's like watching a comeback in an empty stadium.

Raging rider, easy bull: Peter Biskind's "new Hollywood" tell-all introduces the young Schrader as a "bomb waiting to go off [who] massaged his reputation as a wild man when he realized he could make it work for him." Edging out *Bulworth* in the what-coulda-been sweepstakes, *Affliction* is the sort of American movie nostalgically associated with the first half of the 1970s. Low-key and downbeat, character-driven and well-written, Schrader's orchestration of a male self-destruct act could be a belated follow-up to *Five Easy Pieces* and *The King of Marvin Gardens*. "His story is my ghost life and I want to exorcise it," the hero's younger brother (Willem Dafoe) explains in an introductory voice-over that, although taken from the novel, sounds like it could have come straight from the director's own mouth.

Affliction opens on a suitably discomfiting note, the last night of October, in an unpretty New Hampshire town with divorced dad and part-time cop Wade Whitehouse (Nick Nolte) trying and failing to prod his unhappy nine-year-old daughter Jill into the Halloween spirit. The next morning, deer season starts on this forlorn planet and, before the morning is out, Wade's cocky young pal Jack (Jim True) will

become involved in a fatal hunting accident that might or might not have wider implications.

Nolte's Wade is a big, tormented guy with a convoluted sense of injustice and a sympathetic waitress girlfriend played, in a richer performance than written, by Sissy Spacek. (There's a poignant postcoital image of this life-battered, flannel-wrapped couple in a cold room on a too-small bed.) In 1973, Nolte's would have been the Jack Nicholson role, but Wade is not exactly a beautiful loser. That he's apparently the town's last smoker only underscores his

of male violence inherited from his drunken, abusive father Glen.

James Coburn (once the most jovially ironic of '60s action heros) plays Glen as a primeval terror in a few memorable flashbacks and in the present, even more vividly, as an evil old coot, cursing his children as "Jesus freaks and candy-asses," slugging Seagrams from the bottle, and ranting about the disappearance of "real men" like his father. Wade drinks a lot, too, and *Affliction* catches him on his downward spiral—planning a crazy child-custody suit, making late-night phone calls to his kid brother (a repressed

some people of the small apocalypse with which Andrei Tarkovsky closed out *The Sacrifice* but, like everything else in this nuanced film, it's rueful and distanced, understated rather than grandiose.

As personal as *Affliction* seems, it's neither solipsistic nor overweening. Indeed, Schrader's self-effacing direction allows ample room for his performers to stretch (and they repay him with a half-dozen superb ensemble scenes). This raw, troubling movie isn't anyone's idea of a Christmas tree but it illuminates the darkness anyway—*Affliction* radiates with humility. **V**