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VENICE

AFFLICTION

A Largo Entertainment presentation of a Reisman/Kingsgate production. Produced by Linda Reisman. Executive producers, Nick Nolte, Barr Potter. Co-producers, Eric Berg, Frank K. Isaac.

Directed, written by Paul Schrader, based on the novel by Russell Banks. Camera (Astraltech and Deluxe color), Paul Sarossy; editor, Jay Rabinowitz; music, Michael Brook; production design, Anne Pritchard; art direction, Michel Beaudet; costume design, Francois Laplante; sound (Dolby), Patrick Rousseau; line producer, Josette Perrotta; assistant directors, Burt Harris, Pedro Gandol; casting, Ellen Chenoweth, Kathleen Chopin. Reviewed at Aidikoff screening room, Beverly Hills, Aug. 20, 1997. (In Venice, Telluride film festivals.) Running time: 113 MIN.

Wade Whitehouse Nick Nolte
Margie Fogg Sissy Spacek
Glen Whitehouse James Coburn
Rolfe Whitehouse Willem Dafoe
Lillian Mary Beth Hurt
Jack Hewitt Jim True
Alma Pittman Marian Seldes
Gordon LaRiviere Homes Osborne
Jill Brigid Tierney
Evan Twombly Sean McCann
Nick Wickham Wayne Robson

A piercing portrait of a middle-age, small-town man becoming unhinged, "Affliction" represents an unusually felicitous match-up of director and material. More emotionally direct and less artistically precious than this year's other adaptation of a Russell Banks novel, Atom Egoyan's "The Sweet Hereafter," this well-acted drama of male waywardness within an irredeemably poisoned New England family should generate mostly positive, if not passionate, critical response on the fest circuit, paving the way for distrib interest and a respectable showing in specialized venues.

Paul Schrader's most personal films have tended to concern troubled men pushed or drawn to violence in their search for resolution and self-definition, and in Banks' highly acclaimed 1989 novel he has found a vehicle that nearly ideally serves and focuses his interests. Like "The Sweet Hereafter," this story springs from a fatal "accident," the culpability for which is questioned and investigated throughout. But unlike Egoyan's Cannes festival hit, which looked at the emotional ramifications of the event as registered through the reactions of locals to an outsider, "Affliction" minutely examines the final unraveling of one family as its central figure comes unglued.

Although Wade Whitehouse (Nick Nolte) is sheriff of Lawford, a dreary New Hampshire backwoods burg, he functions largely as a glorified crossing guard and flunky of the town's business leaders. An overgrown teenager who regularly avails himself of booze and weed, even on the job, Wade has never amounted to anything, particularly in the views of his ex-wife (Mary Beth Hurt) and daughter, Jill (Brigid Tierney), who can scarcely tolerate her father's embarrassing attempts to engage her interest during the time she is forced to spend with him.

Despite his lack of recommendable qualities, Wade does have a girlfriend, Margie (Sissy Spacek), who seems to accept him the way he is. But by any objective standard, Wade has succumbed to his many shortcomings rather than having negated or transcended them.

On the snowy first day of hunting season, Wade's jock friend Jack (Jim True) takes a wealthy businessman out to bag a buck. But the man doesn't return alive, the victim of what Jack insists was an accidental self-inflicted



BIG CHILL: Nick Nolte is a New Hampshire sheriff in Paul Schrader's "Affliction."

gunshot wound. Although it would clearly be easiest for everyone in the close-knit community to take Jack at his word, despite the blood on his sleeve, and let the incident pass, Wade gets it in his head that this is his big chance to play Sherlock Holmes.

His aggressive attempt at crime-busting soon comes to crystallize the misguidedness of his entire life, as everything begins gyrating out of control. Wade has always been at odds with his physically abusive, condescending, alcoholic father, Glen (a ferociously good James Coburn), but he and Margie are forced to take him in when Wade's mother dies, apparently due to Glen's neglect.

Mom's funeral momentarily brings together other members of the family, including Wade's brother Rolfe (Willem Dafoe), who has escaped to teach in Boston and serves as the tale's intellectually removed narrator. Just as Glen becomes more irascible than ever, provoking Wade to tell him, "I wish you'd die," Wade doesn't hide his belief that scheming local business honchos were behind the hunter's death, which predictably so alienates them that he quickly finds himself unemployed.

In short order, every meager vestige of meaning and scrap of self-respect that Wade might have had in his life is stripped away, leading to a startling act of violence that nonetheless makes sense given his emotional makeup since childhood. A prolonged shot of Wade at his kitchen table with his past going up in flames outside the window behind him represents a superbly concentrated evocation of a man's wasted life.

Plainly told in a dispassionate tone set by Rolfe's brief narration, the story is a bleak one that adroitly uses the conventions of a misguided murder investigation to probe the derelict lives of its principal characters, particularly the father and son whose only influences upon other people are negative. The examination of such miserable lives played out in a frigid, unforgiving environment will not be everyone's cup of tea, and the pervasive chill, ugly feelings and downward spiral of the narrative make this a work that requires an equally sober, serious-minded attitude on the part of the viewer, which limits the enthusiasm that even a sympathetic soul can feel for a study of such disolute and hopeless behavior.

But Schrader is right at home with both the burning demons and the frozen settings, and Banks' disturbing tale allows the director to dwell at length on themes of particular concern to him relating to family, violence, personal courage and fear, moral transgression and the attempt (even if failed) at redemption.

Nolte, who also exec produced, weighs in with one of his strongest,

emotionally wracked performances as a man who can never get his bearings. Coburn, who rarely has had such exceptional dramatic demands made upon him as an actor, all but steals the show as Wade's impossible father. Unfortunately, Spacek is restricted by a sideline character whose past is unknown and whose motivations for standing by her man for as long as she does remain unfathomable. Supporting thespians register tartly in brief appearances.

From a filmmaking p.o.v., pic, which was shot in the Montreal area, is proficiently understated.

— Todd McCarthy