

The Help

By Tom Sims, Executive Director, Cape May Film Society

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The Help is a new film based on a novel by Kathryn Stockett that has garnered its fair share of praise, criticism, and controversy. Not surprisingly, the film version has been heralded as Oscar-worthy, panned as melodrama, and judged as doing more harm than good for the race relations subject matter it seeks to address.

The Help is the story of a white journalist who gets a crazy idea in early 1960s Jackson, Mississippi. The idea: to capture the true stories of black maids working for white families throughout the town. The story told captures the agony of those maids, the varied emotions from white employers, and the mood of the town and country at a volatile time in our history.

I took none of the critic notes with me before seeing The Help so I had a fresh eye or sorts. Is the film a tear-jerker? Sure. But it is a schmaltzy tear-jerker that uses gimmicks to evoke emotion? Absolutely not. Funny that even its worse critics will honor a stellar cast for performances that are simply outstanding. Let's remember that these actors are reading from an outstanding script as well. And truly each one provides an Oscar-worthy performance.

Viola Davis plays Aibileen Clark, caretaker for a young couple's toddler daughter. To say her performance is convincing is a gross understatement. The way she cares for the child, tells her how she is pretty and important—priceless. I can already see her standing in front of the Academy accepting her award. And equally as impressive is the performance of Octavia Spencer as Minny Jackson, another maid who reluctantly agrees to tell her story. Once she opens that door, she soon learns that it is indeed a flood gate—and her character reports on a litany of abuses.

Several of the abuses Minny reports stem from interactions with her current employer, Hille Holbrook, masterfully played by Ron Howard's daughter, Bryce Dallas Howard. Also noteworthy is the performance of Jessica Chastain as Celia Foote—who hires Minny after Hille fires her. An outsider in the community, Celia shows a positive side to the domestic help story. And lastly Emma Stone is superb as the white journalist, Skeeter Phelan, who encourages "the help" to tell their true stories.

This film is well crafted, well told. Its director is newcomer, Tate Tyler, who has few if any notable credits. This film should put him on the map—if he can dodge a few undeserved shots. Leave the critic's notes at home and enjoy The Help. And please if you disagree with me (or agree for that matter), email capemayfilm@hotmail.com to let me know.