

Won't back down - movie review essay

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In the recent film *Won't Back Down* (2012), Jamie Fitzpatrick (Maggie Gyllenhaal) is a single mother and bartender who gradually embarks on a social justice campaign to take over her local public school, which is failing miserably. Along with teacher Nona (Viola Davis), she must navigate the bureaucracy of the school system, represented by the teacher's union president (Holly Hunter) and the principal of the school (Bill Nunn), to find a better way to teach their children. The film grossed approximately \$2.6 million in its opening weekend, and has an overall gross so far of approximately \$4.5 million - hardly an impressive take, and perhaps for good reason. Despite the potentially good intentions of the filmmakers, the film is misguided at best and inflammatory at worst, endorsing the 'parent trigger' movement that seeks to undermine teachers' unions and privatize education to a dangerous degree. By oversimplifying and idealizing this scenario, the film provides a troublesome perspective on the issue of declining education.

It is where the politics and the plot of the film come into play that the movie's perspective rears its ugly head and oversimplifies a very complex issue that has many unique and difficult-to-solve elements to it. In essence, the film blames the neighborhood's failing public school on incompetent teachers, who are no longer concerned with teaching and who simply cannot be removed due to tenure and union rules. The film portrays teachers as being money-grubbing union shills, who simply want to do the least amount of work available and Just Don't Care About the Kids. Seeing this, Gyllenhaal's character, Jamie, embarks on a social justice campaign along with a teacher, her friend Nona Alberts, to 'fix' their public school. The main

characters are part of the primary problem; Jamie, as a character, fits the mould of every pretty middle-aged white protagonist on a social justice campaign, making her character insufferable and obnoxiously self-righteous. In essence, the film tries to ignore the fact that it is clear Jamie does this at least partially to contribute to her own sense of self-fulfillment, though little to no time is taken to explore this concept. The biggest problem with the character of Nona is that, in a film that vilifies teachers, the black teacher is given the sidekick role and painted as "one of the good ones," a problematic and contradictory message.

The film's portrayal of teachers is also remarkably one-sided and flip-floppy. The snobby union head, played by Holly Hunter, is at once meant to be vilified and celebrated, as the main characters fight against her while she quotes Clarence Darrow. A scene in which the teachers are shown drinking and socializing after hours at Jamie's bar is strangely handled, as the characters complain about not having enough time with their students (as a result of union laws), despite the fact that those same union laws are what permit teachers to actually have some time to perform this socializing.

Without the very thing they're complaining about, they would not have the time to hang out with their friends; with this in mind, the film tries to have it both ways by vilifying unions and ignoring the things that unions allow these poor, embattled teachers to do.

Overall, *Won't Back Down's* politics are what drag this movie down, despite the overall competence of the production. The film's message - "Change a school, change the neighborhood" - is positive and hopeful on its surface, but the way in which it claims it should be done is hazardous. In essence, there is

no talk of No Child Left Behind, or an increasing lack of parental/community support and federal funding, contributing to the failing of their children - it must be " those greedy teachers who can't be fired because of unions". The teachers are stated to not 'try' hard enough, and this is the problem with the film. The film is clearly calculated, like previous social-justice films like *Dangerous Minds* and *The Blind Side*, to make complex issues incredibly simplified, and instill its (presumably middle-class adult white female) target demographic feel as though the failing education system is not their fault; the teachers just want too much money and do not care about children. This is a disingenuous argument that is sweetened up far too much by the treacly sentiment of *Won't Back Down*.

Works Cited

Barnz, Daniel (dir.) *Won't Back Down*. Perf. Maggie Gyllenhaal, Viola Davis, Holly Hunter. 20th Century Fox, 2012. Film.