

'Words On Bathroom Walls' feels unbalanced

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 111 minutes

Roadside Attractions is releasing this feature at open cinemas and drive-ins.

Teens looking for entertainment have an option this week with *Words on Bathroom Walls*, a new title based on a popular young adult novel. The film attempts to juggle a typical teenage romance plot while dealing with the subject of mental illness and attempting to add in a dash of eccentric humor. It is admirable in its intentions and has some strong individual scenes, but it does feel like there are too many disparate elements vying for attention. As a result, the end product is tonally unbalanced.

Adam (Charlie Plummer) is a teenager who dreams of becoming a chef. Unfortunately, his struggles with schizophrenia have caused numerous roadblocks in accomplishing his goals. Prone to visions, paranoia and side effects from various medication treatments, he is reticent to talk to others about his condition.

One day, Adam has a particularly bad episode at school. He is expelled and fears that a future career in the kitchen may be unattainable. His concerned mother (Molly Parker) and stepdad

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(Walton Goggins) force him into taking a new experimental drug and continuing his education at a Catholic school.

Initially, the pills have a positive effect and Adam befriends a student named Maya (Taylor Russell), as well as Father Patrick (Andy Garcia). However, when strange side effects begin kicking in, the condition begins threatening his relationships and future all over again.

Plummer is faced with a difficult task in depicting the various mental states of his character. Early on, the filmmakers have Adam speak directly to the camera from a therapist's chair as he lets them in on his condition, although it is done mostly to deliver introductory exposition and doesn't occur as frequently in later sections of the movie. The performer does well familiarizing viewers with his world. Smaller moments, like when Adam is dealing with medication side effects like ticks, are also handled effectively.

Additionally, there are impressive visuals used to display some of the hallucinations that the character experiences. And, there's some plausible conflict between the protagonist and his guardians, whom he feels are invading his privacy and are too forceful in their attempts to find an effective treatment.

While some of these moments create effective drama, the picture tries at times to have it both ways, mixing heavy drama about mental illness with doses of dark humor. It's one thing for Adam to use self-deprecating humor about his unusual situation. However, it's less convincing when Adam's exaggerated alter egos appear (one friendly, one angry, and another amorous) to provide wisecracks and offer advice. These scenes appear to be played for laughs, but there's something off about the scenario, and their comments and behavior don't result in many laughs.

And the movie does feel obligated to try and wrap things up in a conventional way. The main idea being communicated is that the protagonist has to learn to let his family and close friends share what he's going through. In doing so, he can address these issues and help diminish the voices in his head. It's a nice thought and some of the revelations and conversations (particularly between Adam and his stepdad) are sweetly rendered.

Still, as one person after another expresses their admiration and understanding for the protagonist, it all begins to play as overly sentimental.

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This is a tricky subject to tackle and one admires the effort made by the cast and crew to bring some weight, seriousness and creative visuals in order to put viewers inside the head of its lead character. Still, there are other aspects, particularly the more overtly humorous moments and romance, that aren't as effective. The overall feeling is that while *Words on Bathroom Walls* may make an impression on its teenage demographic, the film will not make the grade with older viewers.

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