

Collateral Beauty (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 37 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2 .

Our star rating (1-5): 3.5

*Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?*

Jeremiah 20:18

*...for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and
sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

Matthew 5:45b

Director David Frankel's film, like [Manchester by the Sea](#), deals with the unmitigated sorrow of a father over the tragic loss of a young daughter. Howard (Will Smith) has been a highly successful advertising executive. Called the "resident poet-philosopher of product," he dispenses such motivational bromides as "Find your why!" That is, what is your basic motivation for getting up in the morning. Now he has lost his "why," coming to the swank Soho headquarters and spending several days building an elaborate construction of towers and walls with domino-like building blocks, which he then knocks down in about 5 minutes by pushing over the last block, which falls into the next, and so on. He then starts over again, Sisyphus-like, arranging the blocks in a new construction. Spending just a few hours a day, he ignores the questions and pleas of his three partners, and leaves for points unknown.

His partners, Whit (Edward Norton), Claire (Kate Winslet), and Simon (Michael Pena) are worried for him and for the firm.

Clients, who are being ignored, are continually calling. The firm is headed toward ruin unless they can bring him back to sanity—or have him declared mentally unfit so they can gain control of the firm. (He is the majority shareholder.)

In desperation Whit hires private investigator Sally Price (Ann Dowd), who begins following Howard when he leaves the office. She learns that he sits alone on a bench at a Brooklyn dog park, even though he has no pet. He stands outside the window of a counseling center to watch a therapy group, but he never goes in. At home he sits alone, never using the phone or internet. He often writes three letters and drops them in the same postal drop box. Through her connections Sally is able to obtain a key, and so right after he deposits his letters, she quickly unlocks the box and retrieves the letters.

If you have seen the trailer, you know that the letters are addressed to Love, Time and Death. Like one of the sorrowing characters from the Bible, Howard pours out his anguish to the three. Whit, in a roundabout way comes up with a plan to use three actors he has encountered to pose as the three, appear to Howard, and capture his responses on videotape, doctor the tape by digitally removing the actors from the scene, and thereby convince Howard and the firm's Board of Directors that he is too mentally disturbed to head the business. At first Claire and Simon raise ethical objections to Whit's plan, but, ached with financial ruin if they do not do something, they agree to it.

If this sounds far-fetched in the telling, it did not while viewing the sequence in which the actors Brigitte (Helen Mirren) as Death, Raffi (Jacob Latimore) as Time, and Amy (Keira Knightley) as Love. Howard is too smart to be convinced right away that the three are what they claim to be, but he is certainly unsettled. He even eventually enters the room where the support group is being conducted by the beautiful Madeline (Naomie Harris), herself a grieving mother, she confesses after another member shares her own story. As the complicated

plot unfolds there are a couple of twists that are very surprising.

My son who accompanied me was as moved as I was, stating that the film was better than he had expected. The film's time setting of the Christmas season enhanced the mood of the merriment of the season set over against Howard's almost suicidal depression. Indeed, the three personages bring to mind Dickens' *A Christmas Carol's* Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. Many of the scenes were deeply moving, but then, as I thought about the film, the artificiality of Allan Loeb's screenplay arose—made especially apparent because I had just written my review of *Manchester by the Sea*. The latter is such a simple straight-forward story in comparison. The unlikeliness that the three actors could pop in and out of Howard's life at precisely the right second, or that the expensive process of digitally removing the actors from the tape within such a short time—just too unbelievable, though this great cast convinces you while watching them.

This film, which years ago would have been dubbed a "Three Hankie flick," manipulates our feelings shamelessly. I should also mention that there are some subplots involving the three partners, the one in which Simon must learn to share his own upcoming crisis with his family (rather than shielding them) is the most moving. The film is far from being the Christmas classic that it is intended to be. Still, if you want a good cry and some surprising plot twists that lead to a happy ending, this film delivers. Just do not think much about it afterward.

Good Scene: Howard's monologue in which he bitterly rejects all the lame attempts by which believers try to "explain" tragedy and sorrow. This would be good to bring up when discussing the film *Jackie* with its many scenes between Mrs. Kennedy and her priest, the latter refusing the facile "explanations."

This review with a set of questions will be in the Jan. 2017 issue of VP.