

# Rudderless (2014)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 45 min

Our content ratings (0-10): Violence 2; Language 5 ; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (0-5): 3.5

*The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!"*

*2 Samuel 19:4*

The consummate actor William H. Macy steps behind the camera for this, his first film as director, and for which he co-wrote the script. He also appears in brief snatches as the owner of the bar with an open mic night, but this is Billy Crudup and Anton Yelchin's film. Laurence Fishburne also is in a few scenes, playing a music storeowner who serves as a sort of mentor.

Sam Manning (Crudup) is a hotshot advertising account executive, married, and with a son in a local college. When he scores a big account he phones his son Joshua (Miles Heizer), inviting him to lunch to celebrate the deal. Sam, waiting long after the appointed time at the restaurant/bar, thinks Josh has blown him off, the boy having resisted the invitation at first. Then a breaking newscast appears on the overhead screens. There has been a mass shooting at the college. Josh is dead. Following the funeral, Sam is inconsolable, taking to the bottle. He shows up drunk at work and comes close to sexually attacking the receptionist.

Two years later Sam is divorced and devoid of his fancy house, car, and lucrative job. He lives on a sailboat docked at a marina and rides a beat up bicycle to work where he is a member of a house painting crew. Each morning when he arises

and stumbles onto deck he seems to enjoy provoking neighbors and patrons at a nearby restaurant by peeing over the boat's side, the one facing the restaurant. His ex-wife Emily (Felicity Huffman), wanting to enter into a relationship with another man, shows up with papers to sign so she can sell their house. She also deposits on the dock their son's possessions, a guitar, amplifier and gadgets, and a box of CDs that Josh had recorded. Paying no heed to Sam's objections that he has no room for the stuff on his cramped-quartered boat, she drives away. It is not until later that night he brings the stuff in. His curiosity aroused by the labels on the CDs, he pops one into his player and discovers that it is one of a number of songs that Josh had created. Neither parent had known that he had progressed far beyond strumming a few chords. There is even a notebook in which he has written the lyrics and chords for the songs.

Intrigued by the recordings, Sam, once a musician himself, picks up the guitar, and using the notebook, begins to sing and play one of the songs. He is amazed by this discovery of unknown side of his son—a gentle, insightful one that Sam in his obsession with his career had been too busy to see. Soon he has the song down pat, and hesitantly is signing up at the local watering hole's Friday Night Open Mic.

Most of the patrons are inattentive as he sings, probably because the majority are open mic wanabees themselves, but one listener is enthralled. Quentin (Yelchin), a young aspiring singer himself, is effusive in his praise, but Sam almost ignores him. His admirer will not be put off, and when the half drunk performer runs his bike into a parked car, Quentin gives him a ride home. Despite Sam's rude put downs the younger man perseveres, telling Sam that another guitar and singer would raise the song to an even higher level. When he plays his guitar and sings with Sam, the latter has to agree. Soon two other musicians have joined also, with Quentin dubbing the impromptu band The Rudderless. Realizing that his

directionless existence lay behind the name, Sam goes along, the four playing at the bar. He lets Quentin believe that he is the author of the songs. The band is well received. As the weeks pass by the four gain a following, with the place now jammed with enthusiastic admirers. The younger three are thrilled, but Sam is nonchalant about their success—and by the bar owner's invitation to do a full gig.

One night a young woman stands in the shadows outside the bar. She reveals that she is Kate (played by singer Selena Gomez), Josh's girlfriend. He had met her just once after the boy's death. She chides him for using his son's songs, her bitterness seeming especially strong. Later, when Sam weeps by his son's grave on the boy's birthday, we are jolted by a sudden discovery that shed's light on Kate's bitterness—and also on why Sam had been so inconsolable, his life spiraling out of control following the boy's death.

The truth about who wrote the songs of course comes out. How this impacts Quentin, who had looked up to Sam as a father figure—thus gaining badly needed self assurance in regard to a song he had written but had refused to let the group—I leave for you to discover. At this point the film moves from its focus on grief to one on guilt. Sam lacks the spiritual resources to deal with his grief, turning, as so many movie characters do, to bottled spirits to dull his pain. Some critics have been upset by the revelation in the cemetery, but I found it added to the story. There have been many films treating the subject of parents trying to cope with the loss of a child—I think of Robert Redford's marvelous *Ordinary People* (also the first film he directed) and of the more recent *Rabbit Hole*—I don't know of any that has dealt with a parent in a situation such as Sam's. This makes the theme of the healing power of music, and what he is then able to do for Quentin all the more striking. This unheralded independent film appeared for just a week at an art theater in Cincinnati. Failing to immediately draw an audience because of lack of

publicity, the management unfortunately closed it out—so if you see it opening in your area, be sure to go right away. It is a film well worth your time. I should add that the film's original songs, written by Simon Steadman and Charlton Pettus, are quite good. Let's hope the film will eventually gain the audience it deserves via streaming video.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the Nov. 2014 issue of Visual Parables.*