

The Sweet Hereafter

An Ego Film Arts Production. Robert Lantos and Andras Hamori, Ex. Producers; Camelia Frieberg, Producer; David Webb, Assoc. Producer; Phillip Barker, Production Designer; Kathleen Climie, Art Director; Susan Shipton, Editor; Paul Sarossy, DOP; Mychael Danna, Music; Atom Egoyan Producer/Director/Screenplay; based on the novel by Russell Banks. Featuring: Ian Holm (Mitchell Stephens); Sarah Polley (Nicole Brunelle); Gabrielle Rose (Dolores); Tom McCamus (Sam Brunelle); Bruce Greenwood (Billy Ansell).
120 minutes. 1997.



● A trio—woman, child and man—are lying asleep in bed. Mitchell Stephens, a lawyer, has a heated phone conversation with his drug-addicted daughter, Zoe. At a county fair, Nicole, a teenaged singer, and her dad, Sam, observe the arrival of Dolores, a driver with a busload of kids. Stephens arrives at the Walker's motel on a desolate winter's evening. He convinces the Walkers that they should launch a suit against the city for the loss of their child. It is clear that more children than just the Walker's son have died. On an airplane, Stephens accidentally sits next to an old friend of Zoe's, Allison O'Donnell. Stephens is so distracted that he not only does not recognize Allison, but forgets that her father used to be his partner.

By Marc Glassman

Dolores's school bus arrives to pick up a native boy, Bear. His hippie artist step-parents are the Ottos. "They always waited with Bear." Dolores, in a neck brace is being interviewed by Stephens in her house. Near Dolores is her husband, Abbott, a stroke victim. In the interior of the bus, Nicole is sitting in the front row, with Bear directly behind her. At the back of the bus, two children wave at their father, Billy, who is driving behind them. Billy honks at his kids while talking on the cell phone with Risa Walker. After Nicole comes to baby-sit his children, Billy heads to a motel room at the Walkers' to wait for Risa. She arrives, wearing only a bra and panties underneath her winter coat. Nicole reads *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* as a bedtime story to the Ansell's. Sam, Nicole's dad, picks her up from Billy's house and takes her to a barn where they embrace in candlelight. Nicole's voice recites, from the *Pied Piper*, "one was lame...it is dull in our time since my playmates left," over this scene of incest. Dolores tells Mitchell that she had already gathered 22 "bright little clusters of children" when she picked up the Walker's boy, Sean.

Billy's car is right behind the school bus when it abruptly slides off the road and plunges into the water. Billy stops his car and races downhill towards the bus. Billy identifies his children's bodies. As others make their way to the scene of the accident, he departs. At the motel, he breaks up with Risa over her involvement with Stephens' litigation case. Nicole has survived but is now paralyzed from the waist down. Her new room makes her feel "like a princess." Nicole notices that she has a new computer, a gift from Stephens. After Stephens talks to her the next day, Nicole realizes that her testimony is the key element in the lawsuit. Dolores, Abbott and Stephens argue about whether she should launch her own lawsuit. At the preliminary hearings, Dolores breaks down, listing all the dead children, to an impassive Stephens.

Billy confronts Nicole's parents, asking them to withdraw their lawsuit. If they do, he believes, the rest of the squabbling community will drop their cases. The Brunelles refuse. At the preliminary hearing the next day, Nicole, who had heard Billy's argument with her parents, testifies that Dolores was speeding at the time of the accident. Her lie destroys the case. At the airport terminal, Stephens says goodbye to Allison. He sees Dolores, now a bus driver for the terminal. Nicole, in the past, has stopped reading from the

Pied Piper. She is silhouetted by the light of an approaching car, as she walks toward the end of Billy's hallway.

● Grief and rage and redemption are not the usual elements one finds in a feature film these days. Trust Atom Egoyan to tempt the fates and create a drama that recalls the time when serious adult fare would draw an appreciative public to cinemas. *The Sweet Hereafter* marks a higher level of commitment to telling a tale by Egoyan, this generation's finest auteur.

For the first time, Egoyan has adapted a literary work rather than writing an original screenplay. Russell Banks's novel is structured like Kurosawa's acclaimed work, *Rashomon*. By having four narrators describe one tragic event, Kurosawa demonstrated the subjective nature of truth. A similar philosophy operates as a subtext in Banks's novel. Four points of view are presented, those of the bus driver Dolores, the grieving father Billy Ansell, the lawyer Mitchell Stephens and the lame survivor Nicole Brunelle. They each have to deal with grief, deepening the sense of tragedy that the entire community feels over the loss of their children. Only with the coda, a demolition derby held the next summer, does the town finally rise out of its gloom, and reach an ironic sweet hereafter.

Egoyan shatters the narrative, reconstructing the shards of this broken mirror's refracted image of North American society into a cubist design. Many visions are seen, not just those of Banks's quartet. The loveless Risa Walker, hippie artist Wanda Otto and Dolores' paralyzed husband Abbott, are accorded their unique lives. Mitchell Stephens is allowed to justify his mistaken rage through scenes on the airplane with Zoe's old friend, Allison. Another Egoyan invention, Nicole's reading of the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* to Billy Ansell's children, lifts the entire tale, giving it a folkloric resonance.

For Egoyan as for Banks, *The Sweet Hereafter* is a cautionary tale about redemption. Anger is utilized by Stephens to express his belief that someone else is to blame for society's ills. It is through the clear actions of Nicole that a moral framework is reestablished, allowing her townspeople to live again. And it is through the art of Egoyan, who is now capable of expressing emotional as well as intellectual truths, that Banks's tale is given greater depth and focus. ■