

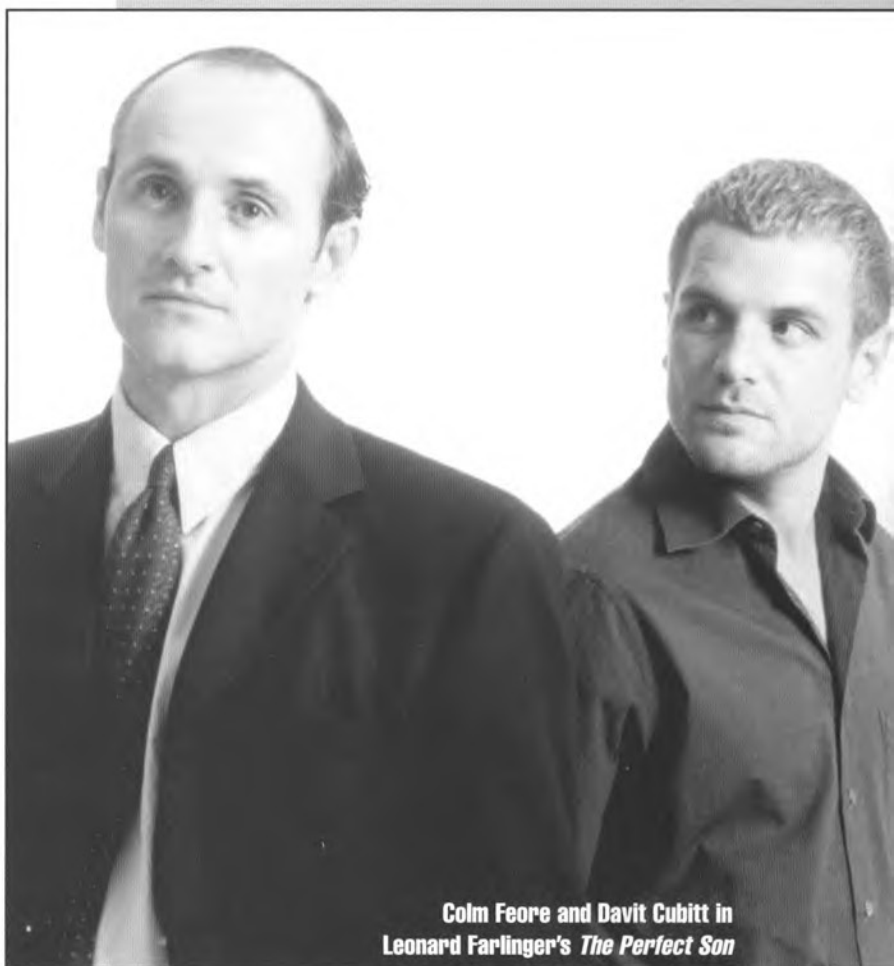
they hold. It's a neo-Marxist, paint-by-numbers guide to the haves and have-nots throughout the film. It also sets up what appears to be the film's tone. In a moment of telling self-consciousness, one of the stuffed suits the filmmaker corners snaps at the camera (and Stéphane behind it), "You're not Michael Moore!"

But just when we think we've got *La Moitié* pegged, Falardeau makes an abrupt shift. The neo-Marxist angle is still there. The scenes of Christophe selling his guitar and trumpet are heart wrenching and the title of the film (in English it means the left side of the fridge) refers to the division of material possessions. But sensing that things weren't quite as bad in the job market as they had once been, Falardeau (as he explains in a director's statement) instead changes the tone and sets out to make a film about the very nature of work itself, and Stéphane and Christophe turn out to be a perfect duo with which to explore this idea.

Although Stéphane is clearly the more ambitious of the two, the brief scene in which we see him at work with a theatrical director (discussing a script he's written) appears to indicate that his work is not terrifically satisfying. Christophe, on the other hand, is an attractive, light-hearted fellow, someone who doesn't want to take work for work's sake but rather wants to enjoy life to its fullest. A scene where he arrives to serenade his hard-working, underpaid cashier girlfriend with a song at her job is both beautiful and funny. It's almost as though Christophe would like to fulfill the dream of so many: to somehow live outside the constraints of work without having to win the lottery in order to do so. When he does find employment, it's even worse than he imagined. He has to help a company dismantle its operations to pave way for a major downsizing. That job ends when a number of the employees rebel.

By the film's final credits, Falardeau appears as intent upon making a personal statement as he does a political one. In keeping with the long-standing Canadian tradition of ambiguous narrative closure, Christophe's fortunes seem mixed. He has escaped his filmmaking roommate, though he had to go across the country to do so. He is playing in a band but has a fight in the street with his boss (the encyclopedia distributor), which we can only assume ends in disaster. The final title tells us Christophe ends up teaching music at a secondary school, which, come to think of it, might be the perfect place for him. Stéphane, however, isn't let off so easily. We are told that he is now unemployed. It's a perfectly biting end to Falardeau's first film, a feature that refuses to be defined. It's a tribute to the director that, despite all the well-worn traps he could have fallen into, he turned out to be no Michael Moore.

Matthew Hays



Colm Feore and Davit Cubitt in Leonard Farlinger's *The Perfect Son*

The Perfect Son

2001 93m prod New Real Films, p Jennifer Jonas, d/sc Leonard Farlinger, ph Barry Stone, ed Glenn Berman, pd Graeme Morphy, c Linda Muir, sr Stuart French, s ed David McCallum, mus Ron Sures; with Colm Feore, David Cubitt, Chandra West, John Boylan, Juan Chioran, Troy Ruptash.

The Perfect Son begins with a shot of a dead man lying on a bed and another man on the phone calling for a body bag. There is then an abrupt cut to a graveyard where two brothers meet, after a long separation, for the burial of their father. One, Ryan, is a successful lawyer. The other, Theo, is a "fuck-up" recently out of rehab. Theo refers to his older brother as the perfect son, the one father loved best.

Theo, who is an aspiring writer and frequent rehab attendee, tells the story in voice over. He has been in and out of rehab so many times he can't remember. He visits a bar, an old haunt, to reconnect with Sarah, his sometime girlfriend. At first it angers her to see him again, but she relents because she is "wasted" and they sleep together. Theo then visits his brother only to dis-

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cover him with a man. To Theo's surprise, the "perfect son" is gay, a fact he kept from his father. Ryan reveals to Theo that he has an advanced case of AIDS and is dying. "I'm way past my expiry date," Ryan tells him.

Ryan wants Theo to help him die with dignity at home, something that Theo initially can't handle. To make matters worse, Sarah tells Theo that she is pregnant with his child. Being the practical sort (Sarah is in training to be a doctor) she opts for an abortion, but at the last minute Theo declares his love for her and pleads with Sarah not to go through with it. She doesn't. Theo eventually comes to terms with his brother's condition, and after an incident in a gay bathhouse where Ryan collapses and Theo comes to take him home, Theo agrees to organize home care for his brother. A strong bond develops between the two, and the film closes as it opened, with Ryan dead and Theo calling for the body bag.

There has never been such a beautiful corpse since Garbo passed away in *Camille*. Ryan's elegant death is just one of the many minor flaws in an otherwise ambitious relationship drama that turns on very little action or dramatic pause. Ambitious because it challenges the audience to stay with this well-acted two-hander in an era when people's expectations of the cinematic experience includes multi-million-dollar, multi-digital effects and over-priced Hollywood stars. *The Perfect Son* provides, instead, a low-key tale of sibling rivalry with subtle, quiet performances.

Colm Feore is up to the challenge. One of Canada's finest actors, and recently profiled on Citytv's survey of Canada's best looking stars, Feore combines classical Shakespearean training with hunky good looks. Not overbearingly masculine, he has more in common with the Swedish star than just a well-lit death-bed scene. Like Garbo, he can be aloof and enigmatic. Ryan, "the perfect son" has managed to conceal his "hundreds" of lovers from both his father and his brother. He wears perfectly tailored suits for the corporate world but slums in Toronto's gay bathhouses. He lives in an upscale Cabbagetown townhouse with impeccable taste and design. When he first meets Theo at the funeral after a long separation, he condescends, looking down his aquiline nose at his "fuck-up" brother. It is a credit to Feore's abilities that Ryan, although initially insufferable, evolves through the renewed relationship with Theo into someone we care about; and his death, despite its Garbo-like swoon, is effective.

David Cubitt, an actor in the method mould, also does a credible turn as Theo. Although his physicality is much different from Feore's - he moves like a prowling mountain cat, while Feore is more like a graceful gazelle - he brings an emotional depth to Theo that underscores his fraternal relationship. He resents Ryan and all he stands for - his corporate success and elegant manners. It's the classic father-always-liked-you-best syndrome that leads Theo into destructive self-pity with booze and heroin. The two play off each other with ease and assurance as they struggle together to return to a time when

they were much younger and had a mother in their life, not just an overbearing father. As Ryan lays dying, Theo reads to him from *Wuthering Heights*, their mother's favourite book.

However, two of the better performances of the year aside (both Feore and Cubitt were nominated for Best Actor Genies), *The Perfect Son* is far from a perfect film. The performances are real, but the characters are not. Ryan is in the advanced stages of AIDS and yet looks as healthy as any pale-faced corporate lawyer should. He is no rail-thin walking corpse with open sores such as Tom Hanks played in *Philadelphia*, another screen lawyer dying of AIDS. Ryan has slept with hundreds of men, yet never is a condom or the concept of safe sex brought up. Courting death, when the Grim Reaper arrives, he conveniently brings along with him a fallen guardian angel in the shape of an estranged brother, who appears to be redeemed by Ryan's tranquil wisdom.

As for said guardian angel, even one of his buddies in a bar tells him he is a beautiful addict. Though unable to remember how many times he's been in and out of rehab, Theo is not a falling down drunk with bad breath and even worse habits. He's healthy, caring and charming. He sleeps with his former girlfriend the first time he sees her after getting out of rehab even though she calls him a major screw-up and doesn't want anything to do with him. When he can't take the pressures of his dying brother any more, he hocks his father's most expensive watch so he can buy a hit of heroin. But there are no track marks on his arms, no blackouts, indeed, no real habit. His character is even less authentic than Ryan's.

To make matters worse, Chandra West as Sarah is not in the same league as Cubitt and Feore. Another one of these wafer-thin child-women, all cheekbones and very little talent, she upsets the balance with some very bad acting and a character who's at a loss. She states firmly and with fierce determination that she will have the abortion, but at the very last minute, just as she is about to go ahead, a plea from Theo, an alcoholic drug addict, turns her into butter. He really loves her! Oh my, let's have a baby! The scene in the elevator where she caves in is the weakest in the film.

The Perfect Son is the first feature from Leonard Farlinger, a very talented director from the Canadian Film Centre who made the Genie-nominated short *Collateral Damage*. The film should have been shorter and doesn't belong on the big screen. It's really a superior movie-of-the-week. Feore, however, once again proves why he is one of the most in-demand actors working today and Cubitt has a promising career. As for Ms. West, I can only wish her the best and hope that some day she gets a part that makes her a star, for Lord knows she can't act.

Paul Townend