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9/11. Two numbers and a slash that evoke a wave of emotions upon every American. Is it too soon to turn a movie camera's eye onto that catastrophic day? Many people would say "yes"; and earlier I might have agreed. "United 93" was, by all accounts, a great film, but knowing the tragedy awaiting all those on board, it is a very difficult movie to watch when not yet five years have passed. But THIS movie…THIS point of view is a masterpiece of despair that will break your heart, perseverance that will inspire you, and hope that will strengthen you.

Oliver Stone has done what no one would have thought possible, especially from him; take the rawest subject matter to the American people and depict it in a respectful manner that could not possibly offend anyone on any side of any political fence, but still not bore you. Because at its heart it is not about the attacks or the repercussions that are still felt today. This is about the selflessness Americans can show in the face of such adversity; the men that went willingly into harm's way to save others, but either perished or required saving themselves. It also is about the American Spirit…from the families who huddled together to hear the news and support each other as the events unfolded to the men and women who risked their own lives to save the two Port Authority Policemen…wanting desperately to salvage some level of positive from such a horrific day.

Stone needed little time in setting up the events, as well known as they are. We get to see several Port Authority policemen getting up on the morning of September 11, 2001 and heading into work. For Sergeant John McLoughlin (Nicolas Cage), rookie Will Jimeno (Michael Pena), Antonio Rodrigues (Armando Riesco) and Dom Puzzulo (Jay Hernandez), this looks to be a day at work just like any other…until Jimeno hears something strange. The impact of the first jet is not shown, only the roar of the engines and a shadow against another skyscraper as Jimeno looks up quizzically.

Confusion reigns at the Port Authority as conflicting news comes in…but one thing is certain, an explosion has occurred at the North Tower. McLoughlin commanders a transit bus in order

to get as many men as possible down to the scene to assist. Once there, the shock sets in on the surrealistic scene around them. We as an audience also know them well, and Stone does a good job in not skipping blithely past those horrors, but not bludgeoning us with them either. Just enough is shown to re-enforce the looks of shock, confusion, and some fear and dread on the officers. McLoughlin asks for volunteers to go with him as first response to try to rescue others, with four stepping forward (the three others mentioned above, plus Officer Chris Amoroso). They have loaded up a mail room cart in the concourse between the two towers with oxygen tanks and are heading towards Tower Two when the rumble begins.

To me, this was the most heart wrenching scene of the movie as the men realize what is happening, and desperately race towards the elevator shaft, the only possible area where they may find safety; a scene even more painful to watch as you instinctively know that at that moment thousands of others are dying. Pinned beneath millions of tons of rubble, the policemen try to understand what has happened, and what they need to do to survive. From this point until near the end of the film, Cage and Pena are almost motionless; the only acting they can do is with their voices and facial expressions. Afraid to fall asleep lest their internal injuries overtake them, they talk to each other about themselves, their families, and any other subject that can keep them alert.

Interspersed with that are scenes of the reactions of the two families. Donna McLoughlin is a portrait of stoicism, maintaining a façade of calm in front of her four children. Allison Jimeno, on the other hand, is several months pregnant and on the edge of a breakdown. To show more of their relationships and provide more back stories, flashback scenes are woven into the narrative of their times together; the Jimenos as they start their lives together and the McLoughlins as a couple settled almost into routine after years beside one another. For both women, their immediate families are the rocks they must cling to as the hours provide no news of their husbands' fates.

Heroes are not hard to find in America after a tragedy, and Stone and screenwriter Andrea Berloff show them at their finest. Dave Karnes (Michael Shannon) is an ex-marine now working as an accountant who feels that God is calling him to help. Pulling out his old uniform, he quickly gets a marine issue haircut and takes off for Manhattan, bluffing his way to Ground Zero in order to help. This is not a cartoon caricature of a do-gooder, but the true rendition of a man so affected by the events of the day that it changed his life. After his instrumental involvement in the rescue, Karnes re-enlisted and served two tours of duty in Iraq. Selflessness beyond all normal bounds were also displayed by police rescue leader Scott Straus (Stephen Dorf) and former paramedic Chuck Sereika (Frank Whaley) as they tended to the men while ignoring the imminent danger all around them.

The acting in this film is exceptional across the board. Cage and Pena shine, as was mentioned earlier, but so do Maria Bello as Donna McLoughlin and Maggie Gyllenhaal as Allison Jimeno. Both should be seriously considered for Best Supporting Actress when Oscar time rolls around. Shannon, Dorf, and Whaley are also impressive as the rescuers, along with Brad Henke, Lucia Brawley, Peter McRobbie, and Dorothy Lyman as Allison's relatives.

So does this film serve perhaps as a catharsis for a day no one can ever forget? Perhaps for

some…but I think it is more of an uplifting tale of one small part, as we are not yet able to look unblinking at the entire picture. Evil beyond all imagination was seen that day, but Stone reminds us that at the end of that day Good was making a quick recovery. Too many of those brave First Responders at Ground Zero did not come out. In documenting the events of a few that did and what it took to save them, we are reminded once again of the courageousness and sacrifice of those who died, and are once again humbled by their deeds. In celebrating the small victories, Stone honors all that passed on that never to be forgotten September morning.

As of today, at least as far as I am concerned, there are only four other slots available for nominations for the Oscar for Best Picture.

My rating: Bernie Kosar (4 footballs)