

CARDINALS

(Dir. Grayson Moore & Aidan Shipley, 2017 – 84 mins)

By Jason Wood

One of the standout debuts at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival, *Cardinals* is a gripping and strikingly original psychological thriller permeated with a streak of oil black humour and a knowing sense of the macabre. Perhaps most impressive is the film's ability to navigate numerous shifts in tone and time frame, teasingly encouraging misinterpretation so as to make all the more impactful the later reveal concerning the true motivation behind the actions of its protagonists.

After spending a decade in prison for a driving fatality fuelled by vodka, recovering alcoholic Valerie Walker (Sheila McCarthy) is released to her suburban home and the waiting arms of her daughters, Eleanor (Katie Boland) and Zoe (Grace Glowicki). The close knit blue-collar community seems content to leave events consigned to the past and Valerie plans on stoically moving forward with her life without sinking too far into the depths of recrimination and self-loathing. But Mark (Noah Reid), the son of the man she mowed down on his own doorstep comes calling, initially in search of closure but also seemingly harbouring suspicions regarding the circumstances in which his father died and his life was sent spinning into chaos. As further details about the accident come to light, a dangerous game of cat and mouse begins in which Valerie must keep at bay past witnesses, an inquisitive therapist and an increasingly vigilant and vengeful Mark whilst all the while protecting her daughters.

A collaboration between former Ryerson University graduates Grayson Moore and Aidan Shipley (who also had a former acting career, appearing in Atom Egoyan's *The Captive*), *Cardinals* fully delivers on the promise of the duos previous short film project, *Boxers*. Beginning as a study of guilt and human frailty, it audaciously veers off in various unexpected but brilliantly executed directions before drawing to a harrowing conclusion that also ruminates on guilt and human frailty albeit from an entirely different perspective. A film that delights in confounding audience expectation, at its heart is the sense that there is always something awful, rotten and malignant festering somewhere.

Cardinals is anchored by a terrific central performance from veteran actor Sheila McCarthy, star of Patricia Rozema's *I've Heard The Mermaid's Singing*, a cornerstone of recent Canadian cinema which is revived for the Canada Now 2018 season. McCarthy was more recently glimpsed by U.K audiences in Brandon Cronenberg's sadly undervalued *Antiviral*. Witty and deliciously acerbic (sample line: 'maybe you could make a list of all the people that died whilst I was away. That would be helpful'), she is utterly convincing here as one of the great contemporary screen mothers, a *Mildred Pierce* for these dark and twisted times.

Having created a work that is brilliantly disorientating, intentionally cryptic and also very adept at conveying moments of utmost unease and awkwardness (Valerie's therapist, who she resents unreservedly, is unique in that he makes difficult circumstances even more excruciatingly uncomfortable), Moore and Shipley also display an incredibly assured approach to composition. The first image of the film, later repeated with slight modification, is of a tracking shot showing an industrial landscape comprised of hollow cylindrical pipes. It could have come from one of the 16mm films of American independent pioneer James Benning and articulates a world that is a little unknowable and mystifying. The sound design is impressive too, crafting a world of echo and reverberation to accentuate the sense that things are not only what they seem but deliberately off-kilter and out of whack.

A genuine and very welcome discovery that chronicles the human capacity for depravity and deception, in certain moments *Cardinals* feels a little as if the Coen Brothers had followed up *Blood Simple* with a hitherto undiscovered novel by pulp scribe Jim Thompson.