

More Beautiful Than Shadows

A *Sentimental Value* Review

By: Adam Dombrow

Sentimental Value is a term that gets thrown around fairly loosely—almost as loosely as “I love you”, or “I’m sorry”; there is nothing more apropos about *Sentimental Value* the film than *that* opening statement.

Sentimental Value is, in my opinion, the hardest of the ten 2025 Best Picture nominees to digest: the film features so many tour de force performances (all *four* of the film’s main cast were nominated for their acting: Renate Reinsve for Best Actress, Stellan Skarsgård for Best Supporting Actor, and both Elle Fanning and Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas for Best Supporting Actress)—yet even more layers, but to *truly* comprehend the film, you need only look towards something beautifully hidden in the shadows (more on that later)

All of the movie’s main cast are magnificent. While this is Stellan—the patriarch of the Skarsgård clan’s—first Academy Award nomination, he has quietly built a film legacy (both on screen *and* off) worthy of praise for over fifty years! Skarsgård provides a reserved performance, but the resolve is merely callused through pain; Gustav is a father who has accepted that he turned his back on the two self proclaimed “best things that ever happened to him”—his daughters—yet he yearns for the chance to mend the fences before it is too late. He’s also a stubborn

brutish alcoholic who abhors change—a trait that he must confront head on if he has any hope of reconciliation with his daughters.

It is interesting to me that Renate Reinsve's Nora is the one chosen out of all of the cast members to be considered for Best Actor/Actress, as her character is really best conveyed through others' reactions to her. There are glimpses into Nora's psyche, but it is made obvious by the end that she is a mirror image of her father: she is an artist, she is moody, she is stubborn as all hell, and she is lonesome. While the earlier scenes focus on Nora's thoughts and feelings, it is the repositioning to her as a background haunt in the second half of the film that solidifies her relevance in the hierarchy of the film.

Elle Fanning's Rachel Kemp becomes Gustav's muse; a chance encounter at a shared screening of two of their older films provides Gustav with the juice he needs: monetary backing/connections, as well as someone to play the main female character in the movie he wants to make. Kemp's motivations for wanting to play the part are obvious—a string of poorly performing films has her career on the ropes—but she isn't overbearing in her approach to the material, opting instead to play the role as an outsider who constantly questions her character's motivation. Fanning strikes a great balance between Gustav's actual daughters, displaying both the acting ambitions and sensibilities of older daughter Nora, while also maintaining the resolve and quiet strength of younger daughter Agnes.

For me, Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas' portrayal of Agnes is the real show stealer. Nora is the device the film uses to convey the sisters' backstory, but the genius of the film comes out in the stark contrasts it establishes between the two sisters; Nora is admittedly "about 80% messed up" from their childhood, while Agnes is shown to be strong and introspective, yet compassionate and understanding. Nora is very vocal about how she feels throughout the course of the film, but Agnes remains stoic, quietly observing, keeping her feelings to herself. The differences between the sisters highlights just how parents affect their children, and how you can see two sides of the same coin—something I will discuss later in the cinematography portion of this review. It is Agnes at the end who delivers the single greatest line throughout the entire film, and it is one that beautifully wraps a bow around the notion of traumatic upbringings.

To bridge the gap between acting and cinematography though, we must talk about the *true*, unhearded, most important character of the film: the Borg home. You might ask "how can a house be a character"? If you don't pay attention, it's actually easy to miss in this film.

Nora's opening narration points to the home's foundation being built on unsteady ground, causing there to be cracks in the walls. This is the first hint to the viewer to pay attention to the condition of the house *itself*. The house is shot in a

very unfriendly, almost menacing way: there is massive overgrowth surrounding it, the colors are offputting, etc—it is very unwelcoming. But as the movie goes on, more and more of the house begins to be revealed, showing dazzling white, open space which directly contrasts the film’s greyscale coloring. For anyone who has watched the movie but didn’t pay attention to the house, it’s a cool thing to watch for should you ever revisit the film.

The notion of contrast is the very heart of the movie, and Cinematographer Kasper Tuxen does a wonderful job exploring that in many different ways throughout the film. I already mentioned two of the major contrasts: between the family—both sisters to one another *as well as* to their father—and the house itself contrasting with the film’s greyscale aesthetic. There is a quote early on in the film when Gustav is discussing his filmmaking process, and how he loves shooting shadows; this becomes integral to the look of the film, as Tuxen plays with the shadow metaphor to slowly reveal the film’s central theme. There is also an incredible scene that ushers in the final act of the film that expresses the theme of hereditary trauma through visuals only.

Sentimental Value is a very human movie—it deals with fully human problems: the notion of “legacy”, hereditary trauma, relationships, etc. It’s also not

the easiest movie to watch if you personally experienced similar traumas throughout your life. If you can handle foreign films, *Sentimental Value* is a worthwhile viewing experience, and although it's not going to be the most "feel good" movie you'll ever see, it does convey very strong messages about the power of reconciliation, "starting over", and of understanding and navigating childhood trauma.