

At the Precipice

✘ When I heard Robert Duvall speaking with Mike Huckabee last year about his film, "Get Low", I knew it was my kind of movie. It's the story of a man who wants to throw his own "funeral party" while he's alive and have people come and tell stories about him and is loosely based on a true story that took place in Roane County, Tennessee in 1938.

Sounds a bit quirky but the movie is anything but. Mr. Duvall plays the main character, reclusive Felix Bush, who has lived the life of a hermit for the past 40 years on the outskirts of town. He's taunted by children who throw rocks at his windows, rumors have been spread about him and he's feared by the town folk. As the movie unfolds, we realize that it's Felix who has a very dark secret, well hidden from everyone but his friend and minister, Charlie Jackson, who has to be coaxed by Felix into attending the "funeral party" to insure his story is told if he, Felix, is unable to unload the heavy burden himself.

Eventually, Felix's secret is uncovered. He slowly and painfully reveals to the hundreds of town folk who have assembled that, 40 years before, he fell in love with a married woman who planned to leave her husband and start a new life and family with him. A tragedy results. **Spoiler alert:** Move on to the next paragraph if you plan to watch the movie.) When she doesn't arrive at their pre-arranged meeting place, Felix goes to her home, confronts her husband, who sets fire to the lower floor of the house. Felix rushes upstairs to find his love on the floor having been beaten by her husband. The husband, who was able to make it up the stairs, attacks Felix who cannot recall if he leaped from the window or was pushed. In either event, he is emotionally destroyed because, ultimately, he was unable to save the woman he loved.

He details his shame in having even looked at the woman, who,

in his words, allowed him to feel love the only time in his life. He admits that had he not done so, the tragedy would not have occurred. The guilt he felt over the past 40 years was palpable and his public confession was excruciating to watch. (Mr. Duvall's performance was superb but overlooked at this year's Academy Awards.)

I commend Mr. Duvall for having executively produced this film and bringing to the screen a story about old-fashioned ideas like shame, guilt, remorse, forgiveness and, finally, redemption.

As I watched the credits of "Get Low" roll, I thought about people similarly situated today. Do the characters in these modern-day real-life dramas feel anything – remorse, guilt, shame, humiliation? Do they ever seek forgiveness or redemption?

The latest in this long list of public offenders is, of course, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who just this week publicly admitted to having fathered a child with a member of his household ten years ago. After serving as Governor of California and leaving office in January, he finally told his wife. He now asks the press and public to respect his wife and children. How come he didn't?

There was a time in America when any type of scandal would have and did destroy the careers of celebrities and politicians because the public was not as forgiving as today.

Celebrities and public officials like Woody Allen, Paris Hilton, Barney Frank, Roman Polanski, Al Sharpton, Jimmy Swaggart, Eliot Spitzer, John Edwards, Kobe Bryant and Kim Kardashian, all who've done shameful things, breathe a sigh of relief because, in today's America, they can continue to maintain political power or enjoy highly lucrative careers because of society's acceptance of their "indiscretions." We'll see how Arnold's career goes after this.

On the other hand, I often wonder if the average Joe actually feels the kind of regret, dishonor or embarrassment felt by the character, Felix Bush. In the real world, obviously no one is reduced to ashes because of their behavior, but lives and families are affected forever by bad behavior and are often destroyed beyond repair.

While celebrities and public officials often have no sense of shame, I'd like to think that there are those private individuals who do regret their actions and try to make amends. But for those selfish, narcissistic people who couldn't care less about the destruction they leave behind in similar circumstances, life goes on.

On good days, I have to believe there are more people in the former category than in the latter. While seeing the public offenders continue to enjoy profitable careers and acceptance by the public, the pessimist in me says we've lost the notion of right and wrong, we're circling the bowl and we're going to Hell in a hand basket, but I'm hoping we haven't completely lost our moral sense of direction but merely on the edge of the precipice, still able to take a step back.

Bottom line: I get Felix Bush.