

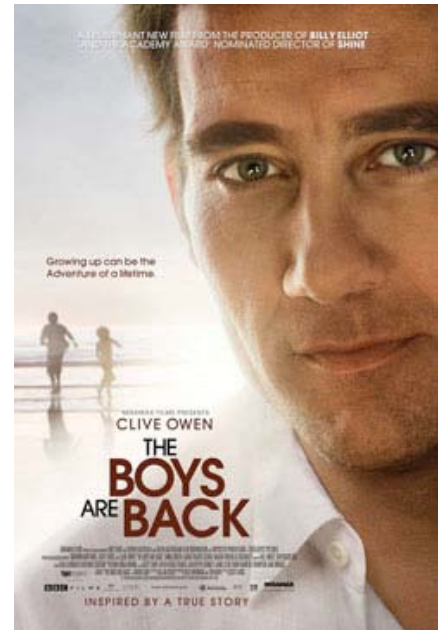
THE BOYS ARE BACK

Australia/UK, 2009, d. Scott Hicks



I am very glad I saw *The Boys are Back*.

If you were to ask me to say what the film is about, I would answer, 'Parenting'. That may not be the greatest enticement to decide to see the film, but it is important to say it. The film, based on a memoir by Simon Carr, is about a widowed father having to parent his six year old son (without any preparation or any innate ability to do this) and then cope with the arrival his 14 year old son from a previous marriage. Now, that may not seem the greatest enticement either – but there have not been so many films dealing with a father trying to cope with caring for his children (there was *Kramer vs Kramer*, but that was 30 years ago). This is an important theme and, with a thoughtful screenplay by Alan Cubitt and with the sure hand of director, Scott Hicks (*Shine*, *Snow Falling on Cedars*), it communicates, and entertains, very well. It also avoids falling into sentimentality and contrived romances.



Clive Owen, who has often played dour, unsmiling characters (*Croupier*, *King Arthur*) then has been transformed into an action hero (*The International*, *Duplicity*), now gives a wonderfully sympathetic and nuanced performance as Joe Warr, a British sports journalist who re-located to South Australia with his equestrian champion wife, Katy (Laura Fraser). He left behind his son, Harry, with his mother in England but he and Katy have their son, Artie. We learn at once that Katy had cancer. We see some brief flashbacks and the suffering and pathos of her death. Joe is distraught. Their six year old son, Artie, understands that his mother has died but cannot, self-consciously, deal with it so his responses are a mixture of the accepting, the sensible and the bewilderingly emotional. Artie is played by Nicholas McAnulty in a performance that seems completely real. In no way does it seem like a performance. And he and Clive Owen play naturally and persuasively off each other.

Joe copes by trying to do the normal things (meals, washing, housekeeping – the latter not well at all) - and show his love at all times for his son, preferring to say yes to his son's wishes and whims rather than say no. There are some moving and some exhilarating scenes of the two together. He also has a sense of Katy's presence, often giving advice, filmed in a completely realistic way rather than suggesting anything ghostly. In the background are Katy's parents, Barbara (Julia Blake) who is loving but organised and cautious and Tom (Chris Haywood), the silent, practical type.

Joe, meanwhile, has to go back to work as the top sports writer for the Adelaide paper and finds some support from a fellow parent, Laura (Emma Booth), whose daughter becomes great friends with Artie.

The further complication and another step in the theme of parenting arises when Harry (George MacKay in a just right performance) comes to Australia: tentative, afraid of his father, wondering why he was abandoned, awkward with other children but bonding with Artie. A crisis, when Joe has to go to Melbourne to cover the Australian Tennis Open leads to hard decisions, which writer, director and actors convey with the right blend of emotion and common sense.

Besides having something worthwhile to show and say about family – and emphasising how important presence, attention and, especially, play are for developing children and for parental relationships – the film is a persuasive advertisement for the beauty of South Australia (hills, coast, McLaren Vale) on the Fleurieu Peninsula where Scott Hicks, in fact, lives.

[We will each bring our own experience to the characters of the film and their interactions. Since my mother died when I was seven and my brother five, I was empathising with Artie but, more importantly, I was finding Clive Owen's portrayal of Joe was helping me to understand and appreciate what my father must have experienced. It is a complement to *The Boys are Back* that it had this power.]