

MEDIA REVIEW: *Defendor*

Defendor (Stebbing & Tabarrock, 2009) is a Canadian film starring academy award-nominee Woody Harrelson (*Cheers*, *Natural Born Killers*, *The Messenger*) as a 40-something construction worker named Arthur Poppington, who dons a home-made superhero costume in his spare time to fight crime and to avenge his mother's murder, under the misguided belief that she was killed by a master criminal named "Captain Industry" many years ago when he was still just a little boy. The film was both written and directed by actor and British Columbia (Canada) native Peter Stebbings (from the TV shows *Madison* and *Traders*), who researched the characteristics of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome when developing the character of his earnest, well-intentioned hero Arthur. *Defendor* had its world-premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2009 and was released in theatres on February 19, 2010. While the reviews were generally mixed - Rotten Tomatoes' rating: 67% critics like it, 57% audiences liked it (rottentomatoes.com/m/defendor) - most reviewers felt that Harrelson's honest portrayal of someone living on the outskirts of society with mental health issues and intellectual challenges was really outstanding. Michael Rechstaffen (2010) of the *Hollywood Reporter* had this to say of Harrelson's performance: "Saving the day is Harrelson's low-key, rooted performance, adding an unexpected layer of poignancy when things take a decidedly darker turn." Amy Nicolson (2010) of *I. E. Weekly* said "The conviction in Harrelson's performance sells the movie - he and his character are both unsung heroes who give their roles everything they've got."

I had the pleasure of meeting Woody Harrelson in Toronto just before Peter Stebbings began shooting *Defendor* in November 2007. I was one of several clinicians working in a FASD Diagnostic clinic in Toronto who were asked to meet with Woody to help him to better understand and develop the character of Arthur. He was looking to learn about some of the more common characteristics exhibited by people with FASD. Did they move or talk or behave in a certain way that made them look different to others? In describing some of the clients with FASD that we had seen, we emphasized that many of the differences we saw were quite subtle and that only those who knew them quite well could identify those differences. We spoke of how some people with FASD have an overly-trusting nature, and how sometimes a lack of ability to understand the consequences of their actions could land them in trouble with the law. "I could have easily overdone certain things and tried to overplay his mental challenges" said Harrelson of his portrayal, "but I think the way to go is just to try to simplify and play him more childlike" (Knight, 2010). What helped him the most was getting the opportunity to actually meet and talk to a young man with FASD.

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"I was inspired by some people I had met with the illness (FAS)," Harrelson explained, and:

I wanted to do justice to this character...I met this kid before I started shooting – 21 years old, a really amazing guy. I was so knocked out by this guy. I met him with his mother ... I really had to find a way to simplify what I was going for. It's a guy who is still a kid. It's as simple as that" (Barnard, 2010).

The actor Michael Kelly (*The Adjustment Bureau*, *Criminal Minds: Suspect Behaviour*), who plays Arthur's employer and long-time friend Paul Carter in the movie, had this to say about Harrelson's portrayal:

Woody is such a talented actor. He looks at you as this character and you just want to care for him. You just want to hug him and help him and you see that this as all internal for him. And you get it. He puts it right out there and it's on his face (Smets, 2009).

One of the other interesting aspects of the film for me is the way that it crosses several different genres. "It's so different from everything else because it's everything wrapped in one" said Kelly (Smets, 2009). "You have an action film, it's got beautiful drama, and it happens to have a lot of funny moments in it. You really have everything in it" (Smets, 2009). Woody Harrelson echoed this sentiment, saying "It beautifully rides this line between comedy and drama" (Smets, 2009). A lot of the humour in the film stems from things that Harrelson's character, Arthur Poppington, says or does. For instance, he uses silver duct tape on his superhero costume to form the "D" for *Defendor*. Instead of a mask, he paints black make-up across his eyes to conceal his true identity. The weapons he employs include jars of angry wasps which he shakes up and throws at his foes' feet, marbles that he scatters across their paths to trip them up, and lemon wedges that he squirts in their eyes to make them talk. There is a very funny line in the film when Arthur stands up after getting shot with a Taser and all he can say is "Where can I get one of those?" In response to a judge's question "Is there anything else you'd like to add?" Arthur replies under his breath "Two plus two. Four plus four. Six plus six." Each time *Defendor* sets out to defend local citizens against his arch-enemy, Captain Industry, it sounds for all the world

like he's channelling Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry when he growls "Look out termites, it's squishing time!" The film's producer, Nicholas Tabarrok, professes that selling the film to potential investors was no easy chore (Smets, 2009). "One of the challenges in developing and pitching the movie," explains Tabarrok:

was the concept of a regular guy who thinks he's a superhero immediately feels like a broad comedy to people and it's not that. There are funny moments in the movie' absolutely, but it's a drama. The heart of the movie is a drama. Sounds like *Hancock*. Sounds like *Mystery Men*. But that wasn't the movie we wanted to make (Smets, 2009).

Stebbins said of his film that he "wanted people to laugh and then I think I also wanted people to be unsure about whether it was okay to laugh. And I wanted them to feel heartache and loss" (Smets, 2009). I certainly struggled with this while watching the film myself, as I often do when working with my own clients with developmental disabilities. Arthur does and says things that are genuinely funny throughout the film, but I couldn't seem to shake this nagging feeling that it was somehow disrespectful to actually laugh out loud.

In the end, *Defendor* delivers the hopeful message that someone with FASD can make a really positive difference in this world, despite the many hardships, setbacks and challenges he must face in life. In one of the final scenes of the film there is a voiceover from a phone-in radio talk show that sums up this sentiment: "Winning *is* possible. We don't have to be afraid. We have the power to fix this. And here's the kicker folks – it took a guy with an IQ of like 80 to teach us that."

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