



38<sup>th</sup> SEASON

## ENGLISH FILM CLUB 2017/18

Chiasso, Cinema Excelsior

18.15

Friday, 12 January 2018

**MANCHESTER BY THE SEA**

2016

137 minutes

Directed by **Kenneth Lonergan**

Starring: Casey Affleck, Michelle Williams and Kyle Chandler

The story takes place in the present, while injecting the narrative with a series of flashbacks that inform the viewer about significant events from the past and the characters' motivations. The protagonist is Lee Chandler, a janitor and handyman in Quincy, Massachusetts, who lives a solitary life in a basement apartment. The movie opens to various scenes of him performing a variety of tasks for the tenants of the apartment complex where he works. Even so, his interaction with the tenants is minimal. After being reproached by his boss for swearing at an irritated tenant, he gets into a drunken bar fight with two businessmen because he believes they were "looking" at him.

While shovelling snow, Lee receives word that his brother Joe has suffered cardiac arrest. Joe dies before Lee can get to the hospital, and Lee insists on being the one to tell Joe's teenage son, Patrick, about Joe's death. While making funeral arrangements, they learn that Joe's body cannot be buried until spring when the ground defrosts, and it needs to be kept refrigerated until then, so Lee remains in Manchester-by-the-Sea until the delayed burial. While reading Joe's will with Joe's lawyer, Lee is shocked to discover that Joe named him Patrick's guardian. During the scene, the viewer is shown—through flashbacks—that Lee once lived in Manchester with his then-wife Randi and their three small children, until his negligence while intoxicated led to a house fire that killed their children. No criminal charges were filed against him; however, after being questioned at the police station, Lee pulled a gun from a police officer's holster and attempted suicide. In light of these events, Lee remains reluctant to commit to the guardianship and unwilling to move back to Manchester, where the locals treat him as an outcast. Even so, he is opposed to Patrick's reconnecting with his mother (who through flashbacks is revealed to have substance abuse problems and to have abandoned the family), and so Lee begins planning for Patrick to move to Boston with him. Patrick—who is deeply rooted in the Manchester community—strongly objects to the idea. Lee only commits to staying until the end of the school year.

Over time, Patrick and Lee re-establish their bonds, although conflict continues to arise between them when it comes to making decisions about Joe's boat, Patrick's girlfriends and their future living arrangements.

### Critics' comments:

- The painful and irreparable wrongness of life is the theme of Kenneth Lonergan's superbly acted film about grief. It stars Casey Affleck as Lee, a guy who lives on his own in Boston, working as a janitor with poisonous rage at the world and himself. This film is about life as it is lived in the real world, with implacable pain, loose ends untied, life lessons unlearned. Life with no narrative closure. Lee bears the burden of a terrible tragedy, which explains his exile from the place where he grew up; the current situation appears to offer the familiar simplification of an unsympathetic guy emotionally redeemed by the responsibility of parenthood. Yet things don't work out anywhere near as cleanly as that.

*Manchester by the Sea* sees the film director assume the self-aware weightiness of an Arthur Miller or a Eugene O'Neill, but blends this with some wonderfully played comic scenes, and even uses some trad jazz over a scene transition that is rather like one of Woody Allen's. It is a sombre and wintry film, and in fact the sheer arctic chill is what delays the funeral and creates the important, though hardly palliative interval, in which the drama can take place and feelings can be worked through, as far as that's possible. It is a movie composed in a deeply sad minor key.

(from *The Guardian*, adapted)