

Changeling: more cult of the individual

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Clint Eastwood, screenplay by J. Michael Straczynski

Clint Eastwood's career as a director is a decidedly uneven one, containing more negatives than positives. His better recent movies, *True Crime*, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, express genuine concern for the marginalized and the underdog, while *Mystic River* and *Million Dollar Baby* are deeply confused and retrograde works.

Eastwood's new work, *Changeling*, falls somewhere in between. It is a movie that places a premium on obstinate individualism within the context of a dark, pessimistically treated world, whose social contours are not clearly understood or defined.

Based on true events, *Changeling* is set in Los Angeles in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Christine Collins (Angelina Jolie), a single mother, returns home from her day job as a switchboard supervisor to discover that her nine-year-old son Walter has been abducted. From the very beginning, she confronts a police force that has little interest in finding her child.

Eventually, as stonewalling by the authorities becomes abuse, her case is taken up by Rev. Gustav Briegleb (John Malkovich), a Presbyterian minister who uses his pulpit and radio program to expose the transgressions of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). He labels the latter the most corrupt and violent "this side of the Rocky Mountains." "Our protectors are our brutalizers.... To be the law is to be above the law," proclaims the activist during a sermon.

The city is in the clutches of a tyrannical political clique headed by Mayor George Cryer. His enforcer is Police Chief James "Two Guns" Davis (Colm Feore), who has initiated a reign of terror leading to "piles of bodies." The police rampage is intended not to tackle crime, but to wipe out the competition. It is, as Briegleb as points out, an agency on the take.

Captain J.J. Jones (Jeffrey Donovan) is put in charge

of finding the missing Collins boy. His interest lies in seeking out a "good news story," due to mounting protests against the LAPD. A face-lift opportunity presents itself when a parentless boy is discovered in DeKalb, Illinois. Jones wants to pass this boy off as the missing Walter Collins and whispers to the stunned mother in the presence of the media that "It's important for you to take him home on a trial basis."

When Christine persists in denying that the imposter is her son, she is publicly vilified and sent to the city's "psychopathic" ward, a brutal holding pen for "Code 12" female offenders—i.e., the nonconforming and the inconvenient.

The film abruptly jumps to other events. The grisly remains of young boys are unearthed on a chicken ranch in Wineville, California (since renamed Mira Loma), by Detective Lester Ybarra (the remarkable Michael Kelly). The police effort unravels.

Why Eastwood decided to make a movie about the Christine Collins story remains unclear. The future actor and director was born in San Francisco in 1930; it's possible that he heard of the notorious Wineville murders as a child.

There is also the fact that police brutality in Los Angeles has not abated in the 80 subsequent years. However, the film ends with the promise that after a scandal is successfully tackled, equilibrium is restored. As Eastwood sees it: "It seems like every two or three decades, the police department and the political structure in Los Angeles goes through some kind of revolutionary crisis. This was one of those periods. There's a period of corruption, followed by some kind of house-cleaning." Interestingly, the film's few depictions of protest rallies against the police are a decorative flourish that can be missed with a blink of the eye.

Nor is *Changeling* an occasion for a statement against the death penalty, as was the case with *True Crime*.

Instead, there are conflicting impulses battling it out in the graphic—and salacious—scene of a state hanging. Capital punishment is barbaric and should be outlawed, except perhaps for certain barbarians, is the film's double message. The movie makes no effort to understand the guilty party's mental state. Far from it, his dysfunction is presented as one of those incomprehensibles or at least, not worthy of investigation.

So what the Collins story offers Eastwood is an opportunity to indulge in his favored libertarian fantasy—the irrepressible individual as ultimate challenger to all that is wrong and bureaucratic. And it seems unfortunately immaterial whether that heroic individual is a gun-toting “rogue” policeman or an anti-police crusader! Eastwood seems not to understand the first thing about the character of the elementary structures of the society in which he lives. This, it should be unnecessary to add, is a problem.

Jolie's Christine and, to a lesser extent, Malkovich's Briegleb are put forth as unusual specimens of an otherwise generally contemptible humanity. Disturbingly, even the young “changeling” is beyond redemption. Most of the time the adolescent appears menacing, more like the devil's son in *The Omen* than a hapless runaway who went along with a police-inspired ruse in order to meet a Hollywood hero.

Similar to films such as *L.A. Confidential*, *Changeling* portrays the police as a homogeneous band of evil-doers. The simplistic presentation doesn't enlighten anyone. The protests of the civilian population have no effect—the hold of despotism on the force can only be broken by one officer who stands up for the truth. Therefore, an understanding of the objective role of the police as defenders of the status quo—and the impact of that social fact on the moral level of individual police officers—is undermined by the drama of a battle between a mysteriously corrupted officialdom and a randomly incorruptible lone ranger. This hollows out whatever could be viewed in the film as a protest against police crimes.

The overall lack of solidarity in *Changeling* is notable. Such a saga as Christine Collins's would naturally evoke an empathetic response. But little of this is accorded to Christine in the film: a few pats on the back by co-workers and the longing gazes of a sensitive boss. In the asylum, it's a dog-eat-dog

atmosphere. Again, the hospital employees are one-sidedly depicted. And, once again, only through the work of a few crusaders are the tables turned on the institution's maniacal operators.

All of this makes for a flat, cold film, despite Jolie's over-exertions. Her tour-de-force performance tries to plug the holes and cover up the film's paucity. Also, while the movie lovingly focuses on external trappings, such as costumes and props, the Los Angeles in *Changeling* seems relatively prosperous, even for single working mothers. Financial need seems not to plague Jolie's Christine, who lives in relative affluence.

Eastwood wants to note the political oppression of women, but not the economic oppression of the population, even though the events of the film overlap the Wall Street Crash and the onset of the Great Depression.

The shallowness and falseness of *Changeling's* perspective—its skewed presentation of certain social ills—imparts to the film an unsavory, misanthropic quality.

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