

Get Low and getting to the truth

By Hiram Lee
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Get Low is the debut feature film from director Aaron Schneider, whose short film *Two Soldiers* won the Academy Award for best short subject in 2004. For his first feature, Schneider has assembled an impressive cast of veteran performers including Robert Duvall, Sissy Spacek and Bill Murray.

Get Low was inspired by the true story of Felix “Bush” Breazeale of Tennessee who, in 1938, arranged a “living funeral” for himself so that he could hear what would people say about him after his death while he was still very much alive. As many as 12,000 people are said to have attended Breazeale’s funeral, which attracted nationwide attention.

In Schneider’s film, Felix Bush (Duvall) is a hermit who has lived alone in the woods for some 40 years. He is almost entirely cut off from the rest of the world. The sign posted at the entrance to his property reads “No Damn Trespassing.”

When Felix feels his life coming to an end, he decides it is time to “get low,” that is, to get down to business. Like the real-life Breazeale, he goes to town to arrange for a living funeral. Felix knows that everyone in the town has heard stories and rumors about him, and he wants them to come tell the stories during the ceremony. Some in town say he killed a man in a fist fight years earlier. Virtually all the rumors make him out to be some sort of a monster.

Even though he is willing to pay a large sum of money, the town’s church refuses to participate in Felix’s unusual ceremony. Frank Quinn (Bill Murray), however, the owner of the local funeral parlor, whose business is about to fail in the midst of the Depression, is eager to take part. Quinn and Felix begin to make arrangements, but their partnership is an uneasy one. It’s left to Quinn’s young assistant Buddy (Lucas Black), who takes a personal interest in Felix, to help him see his plan through.

As the organization of the event proceeds, it soon

becomes evident that Felix is less interested in what people have to say about him than in what he has to say for himself. He’s harboring a decades-old secret that he finally wants to expose. Thousands will come to hear him speak.

Get Low is an interesting film. It is intelligently made, and the seriousness of the filmmakers is never in doubt. Approaching 80, Robert Duvall, in particular, turns in a fine performance. The mystery contained in the film, about Felix’s real character and what drove him to live in isolation, is engaging, and the viewer is allowed the time to find his or her own way through it.

A number of subtle, but amusing moments can be found in the work. Among the more memorable are those in which Felix speaks to people in town who admit they’ve heard “wild things” about him. When Felix asks what they’ve heard, they can only gulp and change the subject, too afraid to repeat the rumors to his face.

One also recalls Quinn’s reaction to Felix’s initial proposal for a living funeral. When Buddy says they can’t possibly hold a funeral while Felix is still alive, Quinn, his mind on Felix’s large wad of cash, corrects him quickly, saying, “It’s a detail we can look at.”

While Felix is the film’s central figure, the film’s handling of undertaker Quinn is worth noting. The latter is anxious about money, perhaps willing to sacrifice more than he might of himself in order to stay afloat. When Felix has doubts about going through with the ceremony, Quinn tries to convince him to carry on and one can see his only concern is for himself. Unlike Buddy, the funeral arrangements have become nothing more than a way for Quinn to make a fast buck.

Schneider and Murray could easily have made Quinn into a caricatured villain, but, to their credit, they avoid this. In fact, they don’t make him into a villain at all. The viewer is able to see how certain pressures are working on Quinn, changing him and shifting in the

sand the line that he might not otherwise have crossed. We are never asked to condemn Quinn in the way many of the townspeople denounce Felix.

The film's "moral," if it has one, is summed up in the brief remarks of Reverend Charlie Jackson (Bill Cobbs), an old friend of Felix's, during the funeral. "We like to imagine good and bad, right and wrong are miles apart," he says. "The truth is, very often they are all tangled up with each other."

The film comes down on the side of taking a more complex and compassionate view of one's fellow human beings. There are genuinely healthy impulses at work here.

In this light, the town—and the viewer—are asked throughout the story to reconsider Felix, the "monster" who is said to have done so much wrong. He has made his mistakes and some of them have been costly, but he is also capable of much more. For Reverend Jackson, Felix once constructed the most beautiful sanctuary he had ever seen. An old flame, Mattie Darrow (Sissy Spacek), describes Felix as having once been the most beautiful man she'd ever seen, a person of great depth and talent.

We are asked to empathize with the pain Felix has experienced in his life. The secret he now wants to reveal has not been an easy one to live with. The decades he spent withdrawn from the world have not been happy ones. "I built my own jail," he says at one point, "and I put myself in it and I stayed there for 40 goddamn years."

One gets a sense that with this film, Schneider and his collaborators are responding, in part, to the culture of hypocritical moralizing promoted by the American media in which one bogeyman after another is cultivated then destroyed and a law-and-order mentality prevails. There are so many instances of desperate, socially distressed individuals—whether a drug addicted celebrity or the perpetrator of some hoax—raked over the coals, whose private lives are opened up for all to judge and who are browbeaten until they issue an on-camera apology. A great deal of money is made from the tabloid industries that promote such backwardness.

Get Low is a small film, and it is certainly a film that leaves a great deal more left to say on the subject. At times, it is more of a "tall tale" than it needs to be. But it is a good film, and a work that seeks to develop a

more humane and enriched view of one's fellow human beings. It is a film that acknowledges the "moral high ground" so often taken by certain figures is very shaky ground on which to set foot.

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