

Redford Rises in 'Unfinished Life,' Feeble 'Man': Rick Warner

(Review. Rick Warner is the movie critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

Sept. 9 (Bloomberg) -- If Robert Redford goes ahead with plans to make another movie with fellow geezer Paul Newman, he can only hope it turns out as well as his current on-screen reunion with Morgan Freeman.

Twenty-five years after they first appeared together in the prison drama 'Brubaker,' Redford and Freeman are reunited in 'An Unfinished Life,' Lasse Hallstrom's quiet, moving drama about a crotchety Wyoming rancher haunted by the death of his only son.

Redford plays Einar Gilkyson, whose self-contained world is shaken up when his daughter-in-law Jean (Jennifer Lopez) flees an abusive boyfriend in Iowa and comes West with her 11-year-old daughter Griff (Becca Gardner).

Einar, who lives on the ranch with his disabled best friend Mitch (Freeman), gives Jean a chilly reception because he blames her for his son's death. (She fell asleep at the wheel while driving to Calgary, the car flipped over and her husband was killed.)

Healing that wound and learning to forgive are the central themes of the film, though there are also diverting subplots about a bear that mauled Mitch, Jean's stalking ex-boyfriend (Damian Lewis), her budding romance with the local sheriff (Josh Lucas) and Griff's gradual bonding with the grandpa she never knew she had.

No Longer Pretty Boy

Hallstrom, a Swede who directed 'Chocolat,' 'The Cider House Rules' and 'What's Eating Gilbert Grape,' wisely lets his actors carry the character-driven story. He shies away from fancy camera tricks and other unnecessary distractions, preferring to let Redford and the rest of the cast reveal themselves through subtle mannerisms, offhand remarks and telling looks.

Redford, sporting a reddish-gray stubble on his leathery, wrinkled face, is now 68 and long past his pretty-boy days. Like Clint Eastwood, advancing age has made him a better actor, one who now relies on emotional reserves as much as physical attributes. Redford gives a lean, unsparing performance as a tortured man who finally realizes that only he has the power to make the pain go

away.

Freeman once again plays the wise and dignified sidekick, a pat role he perfected in ``Million Dollar Baby,' ' ``The Shawshank Redemption' ' and ``Driving Miss Daisy.' ' While he never strikes a false note, Freeman is too good an actor to be typecast as the best buddy.

Bears Outdoes Lopez

Lewis, Lucas, Gardner and Bart II (the bear) are fine in supporting roles -- Bart was rewarded with grapes, oatmeal, cookies and watermelon -- but Lopez is a weak link. She never gets below the surface of Jean, giving a one-dimensional portrayal of a struggling woman searching for a new start. While Lopez is OK in fluff like ``Maid in Manhattan' ' and ``The Wedding Planner,' ' she's yet to show she can pull off a serious dramatic role.

``An Unfinished Life,' ' from Miramax Films, opens today in major U.S. cities.

``The Man' '

``The Man' ' is a second-rate ripoff of ``Midnight Run,' ' the 1988 odd-couple comedy starring Robert De Niro and Charles Grodin.

Both movies are about the hijinks that ensue when a cynical, streetwise law-enforcement officer hooks up with a nerdy, white-collar professional. That's where the similarities end. Where ``Midnight Run' ' was clever and mildly original, ``The Man' ' is silly and thoroughly derivative.

Samuel L. Jackson plays Derrick Vann, an undercover federal agent in Detroit who accidentally gets entangled with Andy Fiddler (Eugene Levy), a gabby dental supply salesman in town for a convention. After Fiddler is mistaken for a potential buyer of stolen arms, Jackson forces him to participate in his hunt for the bad guys.

Almost all the supposed humor is based on the glaring contrast between their personalities: Jackson is the kind of guy who shouts ``I own your ass!' ' while Fiddler earnestly practices his convention speech in front of a mirror and says things like: ``I never met anyone I wasn't friends with eventually.' '

``The Man' ' is so desperate for laughs that it resorts to a running gag about flatulence. The last thing this movie needs is more hot air.

``The Man,' ' from New Line Cinema, opens today across