

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [April 4, 2012](#) issue

It takes a tremendous amount of delicacy and tact to pull off a movie about 9/11 without making the audience feel it's been strong-armed. Stephen Daldry's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, based on the Jonathan Safran Foer novel of the same name, puts you through the wringer.

The protagonist is a prodigiously intelligent nine-year-old boy named Oskar Schell (Thomas Horn), who exhibits some characteristics of autism. His father, Thomas (Tom Hanks), who has turned daily life into a boundless adventure for Oskar, dies in the World Trade Center, leaving behind a series of phone messages that only Oskar hears before he hides the tape. When Oskar finds a key in an envelope marked "Black" hidden in his dad's closet, he goes on a secret mission to track down the lock it fits—which requires him to visit every person with the last name Black in the greater New York area. His companion on these trips is the old man (Max von Sydow) who is renting space in his grandmother's apartment in the next building. He too carries the marks of a traumatic past: the man doesn't speak, communicating his thoughts and responses on pieces of paper.

Long before the convenient 11th-hour revelations, the narrative isn't remotely convincing: what terrified wife, waiting for her husband to call from the Towers, wouldn't even glance at the answering machine? Daldry and screenwriter Eric Roth paper over such plausibility glitches and go straight for phony, sodden metaphors about loss and grief and guilt: Oskar's quest, the old man's silence.

The movie isn't drama; it's melodrama, with the heart-tugging ratcheted way up. When Oskar plays the tape for the old man, the pace slows and Daldry inserts unbearable pauses between the brink-of-death messages, while the camera captures von Sydow's agony in close-up. He begs the boy to turn off the machine, but Oskar doesn't comply until just before his father's last words—so we have to wait even longer to hear them.

The film has the sensibility of an afternoon soap opera. We're shown at least a dozen lingering close-ups of Horn's tear-stained face; at one point he even sinks to his

knees as if to deliver the valedictory aria in a tragic opera. Even more excruciating are Daldry's pseudo-poetic touches (silhouetted images, slow motion).

Considering that Daldry coaxes him to do everything but beat his breast, young Horn can hardly be blamed for giving such a self-aggrandizing performance. Hanks does his wise-parent number, in a role that he's at least a decade too old for; Sandra Bullock, also miscast, is weighed down by unplayable scenes. In one, Oskar blurts out that he wishes *she* had died in the Towers instead of his dad—and then, horrified by his own words, tells her he didn't mean it. She answers definitively, "Yes, you did." It's hard to believe that even a grieving widow would give so insensitive an answer to a little boy who is trying to deal with his father's sudden and violent death.

The only relief in the film comes from the great von Sydow—who gives a performance of refreshing charm and simplicity—and Viola Davis. In her brief role as one of the Blacks on Oskar's list, Davis's bone-deep authenticity makes everything around her look so fake that you expect the sets to topple over.