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## Unpredictable and creative, expect to find 'Three Billboards' at the Oscars

Inspired by classic Westerns, movie finds balance between darkly funny and wistful

**W**hat if your teenaged daughter wanted the car? What if you said no? What if you told her to walk?

What if she said, "I will walk and I hope I get raped?"

What if you said, "I hope you get raped, too?"

What if she were raped and killed, her corpse set on fire?

What if seven months passed without the police developing a single lead?

What would you do with your grief and guilt and rage?

If you were Mildred Hayes (Frances McDormand), you'd cowboy up, girding yourself in your half-Unabomber, half-Rosie the Riveter bandana and jumpsuit and go to war.

In her arsenal are three billboards, dormant and weathered since 1986, now plastered with Mildred's messages, aimed like grenades to blast away law enforcement complacency: "Raped while dying." "And still no arrests." "How come, Chief Willoughby?"

Seven months after her daughter's brutal murder, the aptly named fictional Ebbing, Mo., Police Department is no closer to solving the crime than on the night it was committed.

How can it be that in this two-tumbleweed town, where absolutely nothing ever happens, this horrible crime has taken place?

The despairing Mildred takes matters into her own hands by leasing the billboards.

In "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri," as in every war, there are heart-wrenching casualties, unexpected alliances and collateral damage.

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Structured as a John Wayne-inspired Western of sorts, "Three Billboards" takes the side of its fierce, violent and acutely sympathetic antihero. But it's not easy to stay there with her.



**REBECCA  
L. FORD**

*Rebecca L. Ford is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at [rford@scharfbanks.com](mailto:rford@scharfbanks.com).*

Mildred bursts into town and throws down a gauntlet with her outrageous gesture, doggedly staying her course in the face of universal opposition — even as time and reason suggest a new plan is called for.

Police Chief Willoughby (Woody Harrelson) may or may not be doing everything he can to solve the murder. He is a thoughtful man in a leadership role — no dimwits or megalomaniacs this time for Harrelson — whose edgy choices, allude to dark and hidden depths. Everyone knows Willoughby

is dying of cancer, yet Mildred specifically calls him out on one of the billboards.

"They wouldn't be as effective after you croak," she explains.

Peter Dinklage plays the closest

thing Mildred has to a love interest as used-car salesman James, the single character of any significance that is wholly decent. He is photographed in such a way that his height is apparent but not an issue. Compared to James, the other characters' deep flaws stand in bold relief.

Clarke Peters ("The Wire"), sent to clean up the department in a Mr. Tibbs role, is a solid presence. Lucas Hedges, who played a grieving teenager holding himself together in "Manchester by the Sea," plays Mildred's grieving teenage son, holding himself together as the surviving sibling.

But the standout in the movie's trove of outstanding performances comes from Sam Rockwell as police officer Jason Dixon, who has a reputation for torturing black folks in custody and living at home with his mother. The character arc of this risible, insecure and bumbling mama's boy, according to Rockwell, travels from Barney Fife to Travis Bickle.

Released at the midpoint of Oscar-consideration season, "Three Billboards" resembles "Hell or High Water" and "Manchester by the Sea" in tone and artistry. Directed by London-born Irish playwright-turned-film director Martin McDonagh ("The Beauty Queen of Leenane," "In Bruges"), the movie is surely an award contender for its original and unpredictable screenplay and in each of the acting categories.

"Three Billboards" is at once darkly funny and a plaintive wail emanating from a character felled by love and loss yet determined to take action.

What else could you do?