



ROOM was screened by Kino Ken in early December of 2016 at the Manor Theater in Squirrel Hill, Pennsylvania. Below is his review of that film and of its dvd release.

16 of a possible 20 points

**** of a possible *****

Canada 2015 color 118 minutes live action feature drama A24 / Element Pictures / No Trace Camping / TG4 Films Producers: David Gross, Ed Guiney, Chantelle Kadyschuk
 Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
 (j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 2 Direction: Lenny Abrahamson* 2nd Unit Direction: Justin Gajewski
- 2 Editing: Nathan Nugent*
- 1 Cinematography: Danny Cohen 2nd Unit Director of Photography: Arthur Cooper
 Additional Cinematography: Christopher Ross
 Still Photography: Caitlin Cronenberg*
- 0 Lighting: Dennis Daigle, Scott Wales
 Special Visual Effects: Dave Axford, Ed Bruce, Levente Peterffy, Nicholas Murphy, Eoin Sullivan, Kevin Ryan, others
- 1 Screenplay: Emma Donoghue, based on her novel
 Script Supervision: Carolyn Arbuckle
- 2 Music: Stephen Rennicks
- 2 Production Design: Ethan Tobman Art Direction: Michelle Lannon
 Set Design: Vladislav Fyodorov* Set Decoration: Mary Kirkland*
 Set Dresser: Simon March*
 Props: Mike White (Property Master), Melissa Nicoll (Specialty Props)
 Costume Design: Lea Carlson
 Makeup: Sid Armour Jacob Tremblay's Wigmaker: Stacey Butterworth
- 2 Sound Design: Steve Fanagan Supervising Sound Editor: Niall Brady*
 Sound Effects: Peter Blayney*, Caoimhe Doyle*, Steve Fanagan*, Jean McGrath*

Dialogue Editors: Peter Blayney, Niall Brady

Sound Recording: Ofer Geva, David Horton

Sound Mixers: Stephen Marian*, Eric Fitz*

Sound Re-recording: Steve Fanagan, Ken Galvin

Dialect Coach: Diane Pitblado

**Casting: Robin Cook*, Fiona Weir*, Kathleen Chopin (U.S.), Jonathan Oliveira,
Jane Rogers (Extras Casting)**

2 Acting

2 Creativity

16 total points

Cast: Brie Larson* (Ma a.k.a. Joy), Jacob Tremblay, age 8 (j)* (Jack, age 6), Sean Bridgers (Old Nick), Wendy Crewson (Talk Show Hostess), Sandy McMaster (Veteran), Matt Gordon (Doug), Amanda Brugel* (Officer Parker), Joe Pingue (Officer Grabowski), Joan Allen* (Nancy, Ma's mom), Zarrin Darnell-Martin (Attending Doctor), Cas Anvar* (Dr. Mittal), William Macy* (Robert, Ma's dad), Jee-Yun Lee (News Anchor), Randal Edwards (Lawyer), Justin Mader (F.B.I. Agent), Ola Sturik, Rodrigo Fernandez-Stoll, Rory O'Shea (Reporters), Tom McCamus* (Leo, Ma's boyfriend), Kate Drummond (Neighbor), Jack Fulton (j) (Jack's friend), Chantelle Chung (Clerk), Derek Herd (Diner Patron), Megan Park (Laura), Brad Wiersen (TV Crewman)

An unexpectedly gratifying surprise, ROOM comes from Canada as a low-budget independent drama. It deservedly received Oscar® nominations for Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actress in a Leading Role, and Best Picture. Inexplicably and unjustifiably, Jacob Tremblay's performance as Jack was ignored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, an act of neglect which will loom ever larger in years to come.

Teenage Joy made an appalling error agreeing to accompany a stranger claiming his dog needed help. No such canine existed. The adolescent instead was lured into a small soundproofed backyard shed somewhere in her hometown and imprisoned there, its single sturdy door operated by digital code known only to Joy's captor.

Only a roof skylight admitted natural light to her new compulsory residence, where she was compelled to mate on demand with a middle-aged male known only as Old Nick, probably an alias. This self-designated benefactor provided Joy food, clothing, shelter, electricity, running water, television, wardrobe, and microwave. What else would a woman need?

About two years after her arrival, a child was born, presumably self-delivered within private prison. This boy she named Jack. Though prone before to bouts of despair, Joy found a reason for survival and hope in her infant, choosing to love rather than detest it.

Jack proved precociously intelligent, reciprocating unreservedly love and attention showered upon him by doting mother, accepting without complaint limited space and minimal social interaction.

Joy kept him apart from a man whose predatory behavior she abhorred, packing the boy into paneled Wardrobe for sleeping whenever “Nick” paid a visit. Somehow she manipulated the man into providing essential clothes and food for their son, possibly shaming him about inadequate support of an heir. Copies of escape-driven literature such as *ALICE’S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND* and an English translation of *THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO* found their way into Room, too.

At some point, Ma identified the duo’s living quarters simply as Room. She invented a creation myth for Jack also, in which the boy arrived at a propitious moment from Heaven in order to give her a reason for happiness, a purpose for enduring.

They apparently continued to share dreams and space together until Jack’s fifth birthday arrived, a bittersweet affair.

At this juncture, Jack’s voiceover narration of a sketchy past opens into detailed present. Ma’s marginally decorated cake, lacking candles, fails to impress her son, who spurns the end result. Television has shown him how real birthday cakes look. Either he gets a genuine one or nothing.

Ma’s efforts at coaxing acceptance fail. Jack can be just as stubborn as his parents, both an asset and liability.

When Old Nick enters later and learns the boy has turned five, he proposes buying him a toy truck, something he believes irresistible to a male child of that age.

His prediction misses the mark. Initially enthusiastic about that gift, Jack ultimately destroys it, ripping off wheels after observing a brutal struggle between his parents initiated when Joy refuses to let Old Nick see him.

For the first time, Jack is truly afraid. And not only for his own security.

Joy realizes, too, continued obedience to the whims of “Nick” is not in the best interests of either Jack or herself. Somehow, the two of them must concoct an escape plan,

The first she tries, claiming Jack is running a high fever requiring emergency room treatment, aborts when his father decides to treat symptoms with over-the-counter medication purchases. Jack goes nowhere, left shaky and miserable in vomit-stained bed.

A kind of miracle occurs. While one day earlier the child had resisted any information about the real world outside Room, violent events of the following twenty-four hours severely shake perceptions about his environment. Ma shows him an authentic leaf, one which has fallen and stayed on Skylight. It comes from outside, like Old Nick, and is real. Not just an image on a tv screen. Jack starts to grasp the concept of externality, asking his mother a series of questions about Room, animals, the sky, and television characters. Moving from inside to outside, exploring beyond Door, begins to not only make sense, but even to

tantalize. Is he old enough to understand now and interact with an unknown whatever beyond imagining?

Room's stability has fractured because of his dad's brutal assault on Ma and screamed expletives. It's not so impenetrable a safety zone as he had believed.

Jack's inquiries tip Ma off about his changing perceptions. If childish certainties are melting into fluid doubts, the ideal time has arrived to suggest physical change.

Racking her brains for a better solution about breaking free, Joy hits on the idea of wrapping the boy inside a rug he had been pulling apart anyway. Jack must play dead and keep silent, unmoving. Yet alert. If the boy can manage that sham, she might just be able to convince his other parent to take him outside for burial in a quiet, shady place far enough away the body can't be visited by grief-stricken survivors.

Yes. That was it. She could report Jack sickened further from inadequate medication, inevitably and gradually dying, becoming finally nothing more than a corpse requiring immediate removal.

That would be her story, told with gushing tears and scathing accusations of negligence.

It worked, exchange of furtive farewell glances between mother and child passing unobserved by muddled, tentative father, concerned mostly about unforeseen augmentation of kidnapping charges with murder indictment.

In a fragmented, blurry transition from artificially luminous interior to natural muted colors of autumn, Jack for the first time glimpses a revelatory Out side. He is dazed, blinding light of actual sun high above forcing awareness to come in serial brief bursts. Unrelenting sounds bombard as well, from trains, cars, perhaps the wind. Temptation to apply brakes, shift into reverse, retreat to a less uncomfortable zone of known things, entices. Jack battles mentally and physically to absorb ever-shifting sensations, poised at a disadvantageous angle where everything appears slanted aggressively for maximum intrusion. He allows Old Nick to carried him stiffly across a yard to a pickup, in the back of which rug and boy are unceremoniously deposited.

More befuddled than enlightened, Jack begins to roll back and forth, tugging and twisting, seeking liberation from choking camouflage, missing several opportunities to drop to the ground and begin flight at traffic stops. More foe than friend, rays of sunlight blind unprotected eyes which never saw them directly before. Jolted into prickly awareness by bumpy crossing of railroad tracks, Jack emerges fully from his cocoon, dragging cramped legs behind him, raising head to truck body's nearer edge, still far too dazed for a crucial leap.

Trees zoom in and out of his field of vision, along with fences, bushes, sidewalks, all a confusion of vaguely remembered shapes. World is real, moving, noisy. He's become part of it.

What next? They had rehearsed so long, he and Ma, the full sequence of necessary actions for escape. But it was slipping from memory, pushed back by onrushing images and clamor.

Danger encircled, an ominous mix of known menace sitting behind steering wheel and foreign threats from things thrust at him without explanation or identification. He is indecisive, overwhelmed. Thumpings from the rear cue the driver to what is happening. He stops, exits the truck's cab, advances angrily to confront a son he's never known.

At the same time, Ma, alone once again in Room, is tortured relentlessly by anxiety, unsure Son is safe. She is well within reach of betrayed prisoner, hopes of freedom dashing against fears of savage punishment.

Liberation comes to both rather unexpectedly.

Jack slips out of parental hostile grasp when an inquisitive bystander, unable to clarify the relationship between struggling child and peremptory adult, declares himself willing to enlist police backup, particularly since the younger party in the fray looks like a preadolescent girl being roughly mistreated.

Not wishing child abuse added to other criminal charges, the assailant dumps his load indelicately, rushing off to the safety of his vehicle.

Head aching, winded, suspicious of motives, Jack remains curled defensively, one hand clutching real leaf, his only stability in a turbulent, unsettling environment. A call is made to the police, as no proper name or address is forthcoming and circumstances surrounding the child's abandonment are blatantly irregular.

Under gentle prodding from a female patroller, Jack opens up, providing minimal but accurate news of his former situation and Ma's whereabouts.

Mother and son subsequently reunite in a heartbreaking scene of frantic recognition and deliverance.

Then comes the real trial, as one generation searches to accommodate and relink with another. Sometime during the seven years of Joy's absence, Grandmother and Grandfather divorced. A man named Leo has entered the family, consoling and supporting Grandma Nancy. The well-remembered hammock Joy has told her son about has vanished from its former hanging place. Changes will have to be accepted.

These developments, along with suggestions of unfit parenting, send Joy lurching backwards into self-recrimination and selfish protectiveness. Jack is left at the mercy and in care of Grandma Nancy and amiable Leo. Joy deserts guardianship, worrying too much about a five-year-old's ability to reach out to other people and not enough about her own introversion.

Can a damaged, agonized soul be retrieved? Or is a cycle of bad judgement going to repeat itself?

Adapting her own novel, Emma Donoghue preserves language and limited perspective of childhood in a screenplay dispensing with bromides in favor of suggestive questions and false reassurances. Characters are disclosed primarily by gestures, the unique ways in which each individual moves or freezes. Prolonged silences disclose or reinforce repressed tensions.

Words, when used at all, frequently jumble motives and instincts, replacing imaginings and fears with social niceties.

Such verbal evasiveness irritates Joy. She retaliates by withdrawal and self-righteous complaining. These only mask growing conviction of her own inadequacy as a parent, a defect she regards as taught, if not inherited.

Under Lenny Abrahamson's inspired direction, cast members were encouraged to improvise lines and movements, the results supplying depths of unusual dramatic intensity. Even though that emphasis cuts audience identification bonds, it succeeds in adding credibility to a surreal story setup. No one, regardless of limited screen time, is forgettable or inconsequential. Each adds atmosphere, direction, illumination, contrast, or sprinkles of comic relief at opportune times.

A taut music score by Stephen Rennicks complements their distinguished acting. Operating with disregard for solacing melody, Rennicks uses subtly impinging phrases to introduce or underscore passage from one beat to another, signaling through foreshadowing significant tonal changes. He avoids lush orchestrations, capitalizing on bouncy, unadorned scalar ascents to higher pitches for playful interludes centered on Jack. More somber tones characterize adults, alongside slowing tempos and descending notes.

Considerable thought preceded constructing and decorating sets of ROOM. Even when objects are fleetingly surveyed, colors, shapes, and sizes blend or contrast beautifully, either highlighting or offsetting each character prominent in the action. Architecture is similarly nuanced, a 1960s sleekly modern suburban home posing greater obstacles for the film's younger protagonist than overfurnished crowdedness of ROOM, nurturant womb, site of Jack's early education and wellspring of his fantasies.

Lighting is sporadically vexing, too coy in some scenes. Diffusion and reflectivity are not always appropriate to environs. The former is essential to convey distinct spare illumination sources within Room. Clashings and interruptions of the latter enhance the film's chaotic middle section, where Jack is immersed in a whirl of what to him are random, uncoordinated shadows and gleamings. However, reappearance of these in concluding travel and hammock scenes imply disturbances not harmonious with simultaneous character actions and speeches. Jack and Ma have found contentment with each other at this stage. Lighting should reinforce and mirror that.

With enormous variations in volume levels, ROOM is generally well served by its sound recording. Jack's nearly inaudible whisperings in opening moments of the film are mostly captured flawlessly. There are instances, though, where rising voices gain in volume and intensity at the expense of diction, causing key words to become muffled or sheer inarticulate sound. Subtitles and captions offset these deficiencies.

Among universally effective performances, those of Brie Larson, whose Ma traverses territory from puling teen rebel to devastated bereaved mother, and Jacob Tremblay, who

persuasively journeys from primitive mythology and complacency to role model for adaptation and rebuilding eroded relationships. Using protean flexibility of face to optimal advantage, Jacob is a master of pantomime, milking wordlessness as rewardingly as unnerving explosions of vocal power.

Because of impassioned obscenities, vicious physical attacks, and an imperiled child, ROOM is not appropriate viewing for anyone under the age of nineteen. For others, it is obligatory and may well come to win recognition as at least a minor film classic.

The dvd release of ROOM includes an audio commentary and three featurettes, most instructive of which is a twelve-minute summation of how the film was made. Two others, even shorter, highlight actual layout of the room and transportation of that 11 by 11 set to Los Angeles for a premiere celebration.