

Ladder 49. Directed by Jay Russell. Starring Joaquin Phoenix, John Travolta... and then you drop your voice.

Francis Ford Coppola's *Gardens of Stone* begins—and ends—with a soldier's funeral where the whole world shows up, teary and pious, to hear the report of one dead man's volley echo across those acres of dead men. Ron Howard's *Backdraft* ends with a fireman's funeral where the whole city of Chicago turns out, including the high cheekbones, pouty lips wife who dumped the guy, to hear the bagpipes wail into the ether. Guy Hamilton's *Remo Williams* opens with a cop's funeral where the whole Department stands to, bows heads to hear the encomium—of a guy apparently nobody could abide when he was on the job—ring out across the clipped lawns. So Jay Russell's post-9/11 tribute *Ladder 49* ends in a fireman's funeral (won't tell you whose...) where the whole town (Baltimore, I think it is...) rolls out bleary eyed and solemn to hear the same bagpipes and listen as those same shots reverberate across the asphalt meadows. It doesn't happen thataway. Spent my whole life around brave men (didn't say I *was* one, now...). Those guys die a lot. And I've stood with two-three G.I.s around a bloody poncho on the ground, with a half-dozen buddies at Arlington beside a caisson, with Mom and Dad in the rain next to a pile of dirt in a small town cemetery while a coupla ill-bred kids stare at the backhoe operator as he waits silently for us to depart. So it goes. All this by way of saying that *Ladder 49* is a lousy movie... but that you should watch it. A lousy movie about firemen is still a good movie and a good thing.

Well, it's Baltimore and plucky Jack Morrison (Joaquin Phoenix almost completely colorless and without quirk or tick, like all your firemen) is a "probie" (fireman talk for the guy who hasn't yet broken into the sacred circle of smoke and flame and ash and icewater yet... oddly, too, that's all the fireman talk we get so maybe they call, like, a truck by its number—say, "Ladder 49"—or a fire by its rating—oh, say, a "four alarm"—but that's about it. If they got any kinda secret professional lingo, didn't make it into this flick and I betcha firemen spot that right off...). Probies do the brunt of work... *and* take the brunt of good-natured hazing, turns out, at least in Balty. We get a batch of call-me-Al guy stuff, like that old guy prank of stuffing a goose in a feller's wall locker. Different kinda "guy," maybe, up there in Baltimore. Anyhow... They're all Irish, natch, and we get some tee-hee Irish Catholic humor (maybe *you've* found something to yuck about at Mass; 50 years and I haven't...) as Jack gets conned into confessing to a phony priest that he's had "thoughts"; then the buds turn the tables on the prankster/confessor, fetch up a phony confession from a plant that he's "one of them." Chief Mike Kennedy (!) greets the newbies in heart-print drawers with a bottle of Irish (!) whiskey on his desk. It's one rash of giggles after another... just like things at the local station house, I'm guessing: geese, priests, drawers...

Idea—best I can figure—is to show a plain old guy come on board, get blooded (singed, maybe), become a pro, ask himself why, then settle in for a long career in public service, the thankless watch over us dumbo (and worthless) citizens out here where we're always setting fire to stuff. Sooooo... we watch Jack hit his first fire, meet the "animal" (*Backdraft*) face to face; nail his first conquest in the supermarket where fast-talking—and lubricious evidently—firemen snag all the high cheekbones, pouty lips, tight jeans fee-male melon-thumpers; mature into a serious fireguy and get to plague the probies in his own right; explain death to a barefaced kid; swap a future for a calling, as I suppose few enough of us have; take that inexplicable risk for another—

and unknown—human being (who's done that?); and at length face death and in that last or is it or not moment conduct a review and adding up of what he's done... and for whom. Idea doesn't seem that bad. It's just that in recounting a regular guy's life, Russell has made it at once too regular and not regular enough: this guy hasn't been jerked around by the boss (who loves him in the flick); cheated on by the wife; dumped by the high cheekbones, pouty lips, tight jeans girl friend for the safer, harmlesser, less riskier guy; passed over for promo or failed the next level exam on a twiddle; been in a shrieking fight about money or the jerky kids or the idiot in-laws; hasn't faced all the brute monotony of a job only in part about fire and a lot about prevention and stand down. The wife's too cute. The kids, too. Travolta's too benign. The fires are too spectacular. It's that chimney fire at 0200 on a sleety January night in a house that *oughta* burn down that firemanning is all about. This guy Phoenix, furthermore, has just plain ol' never done anything for me. There's an ensemble cast of all your typical firehouse denizens: fat guy, mouthy guy, black guy, old guy, funny mustache guy, doomed guy, and on and on. Bunch of guys. But no guy talk. No guy fun. No guy hate. No guy love. Lousy movie. Go see it. Go rent it. You're never wrong watching firemen.