Culture



Kelvin Harrison Jr., Taylor Russell, Sterling K. Brown, and Renée Elise Goldsberry (l-r) star in Trey Edward Shults's new film "Waves."
(Courtesy of A24)



by Rose Pacatte

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The Williams family in the new film "Waves," could be any middle-class American family in South Florida that works hard and gets an education. Things are going well — until they are not.

The dad, Ronald (Sterling K. Brown), is successful, stern and somewhat standoffish, but still gets along with his teenage kids, Tyler (Kelvin Harrison Jr.) and Emily (Taylor Russell)*. His wife, and the children's stepmother, is the sweet and fragile Catharine (Renée Elise Goldsberry), the only mother the kids have ever known.

Tyler is a high school wrestler with something to prove, especially to his dad and his girlfriend Alexis (Alexa Demie)*. The days go by as the Williams family goes to church, work and school. During a wrestling match, Tyler tears his bicep and has to consider surgery. He takes pain pills and starts to drink because the injury has changed the trajectory of his plans. When Alexis becomes pregnant, everything changes. Tyler takes her to an abortion clinic, but she decides to keep the baby. They argue and break up.

Intoxicated and high, Tyler becomes livid when he sees Alexis on social media; she's at a party with someone else. He goes to the house and confronts her. He pushes Alexis and she suffers a fatal head injury. The Williams family is broken by the legal process that follows. Emily, a year or so younger than Tyler, rides her bike around and tries to remain hidden, ashamed and lost at what has happened to her family.

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By chance, Luke (Lucas Hedges), who knows her from school, sees Emily and asks her out. They become friends and spend a lot of time talking. When Luke receives word that his estranged father is dying in Missouri, the young people go to visit him because, as Emily tells Luke, he will regret it if he doesn't. Her parents, who are barely speaking, are incredibly worried about Emily. She finally texts them that she is safe and coming home.

"Waves," written and directed by Trey Edward Shults, is a highly constructed artistic production. It has two parts with sequences that flow from one to the other, rather than the traditional three-act format. Tyler is the focus of the first part, which plays out like a drawn-out teen drama. The focus shifts to Emily's experience in the

second part and has a more leisurely but painful European film feel.

In addition to the lush hues of the cinematography, there is the soundtrack. When Shults sent the script to the actors, he used different font colors to indicate the ever-changing flow and intensity of emotions and links to the songs from artists like Frank Ocean, Tony K., and Chance the Rapper. He wanted the actors to have a complete feel for the film before shooting began. The songs are extremely well-chosen and function exactly as Shults intended.



Kelvin Harrison Jr. and Sterling K. Brown (l-r) play father and son in "Waves." (Courtesy of A24)

In an interview with Goldsberry, she admitted that she was attracted to the part because she would have the chance to work with Brown, someone she admires very much. She said she was concerned that the tragedy in the film would reinforce stereotypes about young black males, and "if seeing this on screen was something the world needed." Being responsible filmmakers was something that concerned the entire cast and crew. She thinks that black people will be able to find themselves in this film but so will every other family because it is a universal story. Goldsberry also believes that Harrison's portrayal of the conflicted young man, Tyler, is spot on and his performance shows "a three-dimensional human being with a beating heart" that young people can identify with.

The most compelling scenes in the film for Goldsberry (who originated the role of Angelica Schuyler in the Broadway musical "Hamilton") were those in the courtroom when Tyler is in front of the judge, pleads guilty and is sentenced.



Actress Taylor Russell plays Emily in the film Waves. (Courtesy of A24)

"We shot this is in an actual courtroom in Florida with actual people who do these jobs," she said. "This gives the moment authenticity, in that space where so many young people are sentenced. There's no way to prepare for a scene like this, to hear his sentence, and look at the young woman's parents. I think it is good for the camera to get into these spaces, to see these corners of these spaces" of human experience.

I asked Goldsberry what she saw in the film and what she hoped people would take away from it.

"I see the beauty of grace in this film, the power of the family," she said. "There's an example of resilience, too. It's also a cautionary tale about things we need to be more mindful of as we communicate with our children and show them to manage stress and disappointment. This is also an example of people continuing on beyond terrible tragedy. As humans we fail and bad things do happen to us and we need to know that there is still, in front of us, hope and tomorrow, and we just need to get to the next day. How do you survive something terrible? You keep living, getting up, brushing your teeth, everyday. It sounds simple but when you are at your lowest, it's very hard. We have to keep going."



Actress Renée Elise Goldsberry plays Catherine in the film "Waves" (Courtesy of A24)

Goldsberry also said a friend of hers said after a screening of the film that she was going "to be more mindful of her children's silences." This is a profound insight because Tyler and Emily withdraw in the film and go through darkness alone. This experience has consequences. Emily's loneliness is palpable. But ultimately, it is her gift of communication, to respond to her parents and invite them into a conversation with her, that lifts the film into a place of hope.

The one aspect of the film that challenged me (in addition to its running time of about 150 minutes) was how much sex the young people engage in and the parents never address this, even after seeing the devastating results of Tyler and Alexis' relationship. The family goes to church but there are no signs that their beliefs make any difference to the family ethos or to their moral choices. But perhaps this lack of human integration, of communication in all its dimensions, is the whole point: it leads to brokenness and fragmentation. Communication is the beginning of healing and hope.

"Waves" doesn't preach to the audience. It is a visual and aural epic that shows how a family struggles to find the grace in their lives amid struggles, bad choices and life itself.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the founding director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]

**This story has been updated with the correct names of the characters and actors.*