There’s probably no filmmaker who has been as devoted to the cause of bringing Stephen King to the screen as Mick Garris. His seventh time at this particular bat is BAG OF BONES, a two-part TV movie premiering on A&E this Sunday, and it’s a noble effort that unfortunately doesn’t quite come off.

Part of the issue simply seems to have been the hurdle of condensing King’s thick book down to a four-hour program (really just under three, if you take out the commercials). In THE STAND, his best King work and a genre-TV milestone, Garris had twice that long to dramatize the material, and he made it count. BAG OF BONES the book is shorter than THE STAND, though not by too much, and while the director’s passion for the project comes through here and there, what he and his screenwriter Matt Venne deliver overall is kind of a Reader’s Digest Condensed Version that hits a lot of the key moments, but misses the depth and soul of King’s tale.

BAG OF BONES the TV movie also doesn’t trust the audience to ease into the story the way King does, and hits viewers with shock-cut flash-forwards to some of the bad stuff during the opening credits. We then meet Mike Noonan (Pierce Brosnan), a best-selling author with a loving, inspiring wife, Jo (Annabeth Gish). After she meets an untimely death (in a more directly brutal way than in the novel), Mike develops writer’s block and begins to receive signs suggesting her spirit still lingers, and decides to deal with both by taking an extended trip to his vacation house on the pointedly named Dark Score Lake. Once there, he continues to believe Jo is trying to contact him from beyond while suspecting she got up to more at he house herself than he’d like to know, and also experiences flashes and uncovers clues about the history of another dead woman, early-20th-century singer Sara Tidwell (Anika Noni Rose). He gets a new living woman in his life too: local Mattie Devore (Melissa George), whom he meets after rescuing her little daughter from potentially becoming road pizza, and becomes closer to with while helping her in a nasty custody battle with her vicious old father-in-law, Max (William Schallert).

King’s novel has been deservedly praised for being as strong on the personal drama as it is with the supernatural elements, and that, sadly, is what gets most lost in the TV adaptation. As King writes it, for example, Mike’s involvement with Mattie and her daughter, and his efforts to defend them against the conniving Max, give him new people to care about in the wake of Jo’s loss and a fresh purpose in life now that he’s no longer inspired to pursue his chosen craft. In the first half of the movie, the scenes involving Mike and Mattie (particularly their first one together) are so pared down that they feel like little more than interruptions of the ghostly stuff going on back at the house. Trying to pack in all the important story points, the plot proceeds in fits and starts, relationships are underdeveloped and some of the book’s more violent highlights feel truncated too, like a nasty encounter between Mike, Max and the latter’s Countess Dracula-esque assistant Rogette (Deborah Grover).

Garris and Venne also faced the problem that BAG OF BONES is a very interior novel, a lot of it taking place with Mike alone with his thoughts and crucial information delivered in phone conversations. That’s tough stuff to translate to the visual medium of film, and while Brosnan holds his own in scenes where it’s just himself onscreen, too much of his thinking out loud, and dialogue from the supporting characters in other scenes, plays like over-obvious exposition. The scary stuff comes off somewhat better, as Garris brings the creepy at scattered moments plus some well-timed jolts (I admit I jumped twice). Most of this comes during dream sequences, which might strike some viewers as too convenient or clichéd, but to be fair, it was that way in King’s book as well. This may be basic cable, but Garris was allowed to go pretty far with his makeup FX (excellent work by Adrien Morot, highlighted by the living corpse of a young girl and a startling stabbing), not to mention the overall theme of children in danger. Yet their general impact is blunted because you just don’t get to care about these people enough, and when it comes time to definitively explain why the horrors are happening, the point is hammered home with screamed dialogue during a key setpiece that’s too on-the-nose—more telling instead of showing.

Garris’ craft can’t be faulted here; BAG OF BONES looks and sounds great, and you can tell he’s sympathetically attuned to his actors, getting heartfelt work out of Brosnan, George and Gish and an authentic-feeling turn from Rose as a singer from another age, while sitcom veteran Schallert seems to relish playing a meanie. One wishes that all of them could have had more time and the ability to really make their characters live and breathe; as it is, the metaphor of BAG OF BONES’ title seems all too unfortunately appropriate for a movie that has the skeleton of its source, but not enough of the meat.