## 'Safe' Offers Difficult **And Compelling Plot**

I lived in Manhattan over the summer, and heard of no film more anticipated than Todd Haynes' "Safe." Since then I have read everywhere that it's a powerhouse film, maybe the best of the year. However the turnout for opening weekend at Durham's Carolina Theatre was surpris-ingly small. Apparently, many who saw "Safe" at Cannes walked out midway through the film. Why?

As advance notices have said, "Safe" stands out be-

cause it is actuthing, even (especially) with this recent recent BRYAN DONNELL **Movie Review** A

Quentin Tarantino-led resurgence of indie mmaking. Being about something rarely magnetizes viewers to a film, unless it director can promise a safely exciting ride along the way. Indie films of the "Clerks"-and "Pulp Fiction" type may in fact suc-ceed commercially because they are en-tirely about the ride itself. "Safe", however, is unapologetically difficult, even gru-elling. It's all about ambiguity: no security, no sure resolutions. Suspense drives you relentlessly through the story, but it is a suspense that means being constantly unbalanced and disoriented

The story follows Carol (played painfully well by Julianne Moore) from the "safety" ofher suburban existence through the onset of "EI" an undiagnosable immune deficiency disorder that strongly re-sembles AIDS. This "environmental illsembles ADJS. This environmental illness," is apparently caused by contact with everyday household substances: makeup, car exhaust, her husband's cologne. Carol responds to a flier that asks, "Are you

allergic to the 20th century?"

Two traps director Haynes could have fallen into with this story would have made "Safe" palatable to a much wider audience while still remaining respectable.

First of all, he could have made a film about the disease — a kind of art house

AIDS, for example, are ripe for an adven-ture tale fueled by tidy moralizing. Secondly, he could have made a victim

out of Carol and worked a grand catharsis

Carol does not exactly earn our sympathy. The key tension of the film is that we are never really sure whether her disease is "real" or a symptom of the elaborate emo-tional defenses she pillows between herself and everything that could possibly touch her. As a friend with whom I saw "Safe" observed, Carol's extreme frailty arouses a desire to see her as cracked rather than protected. When a doctor tells Carol she's perfectly healthy, although her face appears as ravaged as an AIDS patient's, it is all too easy to wonder if the doctor is right.

Complicating matters is the fact that we Complicating matters is the fact that we see everything from her point of view. The doubt we have toward her, then, circles back onto us as paranoia. When her husband (Xander Berkeley) sprays deodorant near her, we are seizzed with apprehension, but then we wonder: is this really some thing to fear, or are we seizing upon the thing to fear, or are we seizing upon the unimportant in trying, along with Carol, to find an enemy?

Carol eventually leaves her family for the Wrenwood Center, an isolationist New Mexico safe haven for the "environmentally ill." The Center's cheesy New Age guru (Peter Friedman) preaches self-love, and the residents sing feel-good folk songs. Although every effort is made to block the bad vibes of the outside world. Carol's health still plummets. There is no resolu-tion: the point of "Safe" is ambiguity itself. Haynes fully exploits the fact that film can show us only appearances, in order to create a sense of dread around how hard it is to fix what is underneath. In Carol's case, when the self under the surface is unknown, hated and lost among its own defenses, this inspires a terror that Haynes implies may be the real "20th century disease."



## Turturro, Richards Keep 'Unstrung' Tied Together

Many (if not most) films released durpushers:" movies that the audience sits

through and is TODD GILCHRIST more or less instructed to be Movie Review "Unstrung Heroes" tain places, sad

at some places, and say "awww... ." in certain places, but rarely is emotion elicited based on the

power of the scene or the acting itself. Any vehicle with a star like Andie MacDowell would normally considered a button-pusher, but "Unstrung Heroes" is saved by the presence of John Turturro.

Steven Lidz (Nathan Watt) is 12 years old and his life is growing more complex by the day. His mother falls ill, and he is left to cope with his father, Sid (Turturro), who devotes all of his time to finding a cure for

with his uncles, one of whom is a manic onspiracy theorist and the other, a childlike junk collector. Steven soon assimilates himself into their lifestyle, practicing Juda-ism and changing his name to Franz.

Diane Keaton makes her feature film directing debut with "Heroes." Her genteel directing was obviously influenced by Woody Allen, in whose films came many of her most distinguished performances

("Annie Hall" and "Sleeper").

Andie MacDowell's performance was subpar even for her; she makes maternal concern sound like whiny nagging, and her displays of weakness are carried off by unnecessary physical motion. Another actress would have served the film much

Turturro's performance is the saving grace of the film. To put an actor of his caliber into a film like this is to elevate it to another level. His meditative stares are especially effective in the more serious moments, and in the final scene, his rap-port with Steven is so pure and natural that even this jaded reviewer wiped away a tear

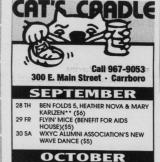
or two.

Michael Richards, who is best known as Kramer on "Seinfeld," turned a character that might have been simply a mug-fest into a substantially believable role; his transition from the beginning to the end of the film was surprisingly deep. Maury Chaykin, who is frequently takes supporting roles in films (among them "Sommersby" and "Hero"), effectively conveyed that Arthur, despite his eccentricities, grasps the funda-mentals of life perhaps better than most

other people.
Like Jodie Foster, Keaton has a definite future in directing, but hopefully in the future she'll choose to hire actors for their ability and not for their marquee value. Still, "Unstrung Heroes" has several qui-etly powerful moments, and is generally an enjoyable film to watch







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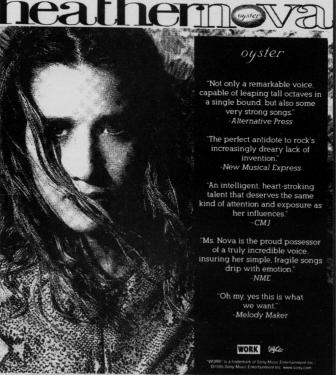
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