

'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 surprisingly small. Apparently, many who saw "Safe" at Cannes walked out midway through the film. Why?

As advance notices have said, "Safe" stands out because it is actually about something, even (especially) with this recent

Quentin Tarantino-led resurgence of indie filmmaking. Being about something rarely magnetizes viewers to a film, unless its director can promise a safely exciting ride along the way. Indie films of the "Clerks"- and "Pulp Fiction"-type may in fact succeed commercially because they are entirely about the ride itself. "Safe", however, is unapologetically difficult, even grueling. 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" of her suburban existence through the onset of "EI" an undiagnosable immune deficiency disorder that strongly resembles AIDS. 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

"Outbreak". The parallels between EI and AIDS, for example, are ripe for an adventure tale fueled by tidy moralizing.

Secondly, he could have made a victim out of Carol and worked a grand catharsis out of the ending.

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 emotional 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 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 seized with apprehension, but then we wonder: is this really something 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 cheery 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 resolution: 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."



Sid Lidz (John Turturro, left) and his brother Danny (Michael Richards) are a study in contrasts, each avoiding what they view as craziness in the other.

Turturro, Richards Keep 'Unstrung' Tied Together

Many (if not most) films released during the year can be described as "button-pushers": movies that the audience sits through and is more or less instructed to be happy at certain places, sad at some places, and say "awww..." in certain places, but rarely is emotion elicited based on the

TODD GILCHRIST
Movie Review
"Unstrung Heroes"
C+

power of the scene or the acting itself. Any vehicle with a star like Andie MacDowell would normally be 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 his wife's disease.

Frustrated, Steven runs away to live with his uncles, one of whom is a manic conspiracy theorist and the other, a child-like junk collector. Steven soon assimilates himself into their lifestyle, practicing Judaism 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

better. 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 rapport 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 "Somerset" and "Hero"), effectively conveyed that Arthur, despite his eccentricities, grasps the fundamentals 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 quietly powerful moments, and is generally an enjoyable film to watch.

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