

## Bubble

Stephen Soderbergh is the most protean of current American filmmakers. As a writer/director from his first film *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) to the present he has experimented with film in myriad forms, from European noir (*Kafka*) through coming-of-age stories (*King of the Hill*) to mainstream crowd-pleasers (*Erin Brockovich*, *Oceans Eleven*). Not to mention his magnum opus, *Traffic*, and a recent essay in video, *Full Frontal*. Well, the man's at it again with his latest work, *Bubble*, a film shot in high definition (HD) video in the middle of nowhere (the southern Ohio/West Virginia border) with a cast of non-actors.

The film is a kind of landmark, being made under the rubric of HDNet Films, a new division of 2929 Entertainment, that is producing a new slate of feature films only in high definition video, said films to be simultaneously released in theaters, on cable television, and for home use on DVD. Soderbergh is slated to make six such films for the company.

The first effort of that series, *Bubble*, could be classed as a short story film (it runs only 72 minutes) or a chamber work (a sextet of actors). It seems modest in all respects--in budget, plot, emotion, setting. Its world is the narrow one of small-town America, where, in a down-at-the-heels doll factory, co-workers Martha (Debbie Doebereiner), a lonely, plus-size woman living with her ailing father (Omar Cowan), and Kyle (Dustin James Ashley), a taciturn, phobic young man, have become buddies on the job, even with a considerable disparity in their ages. Into the factory comes a newcomer, Rose (Misty Dawn Wilkins), an attractive, ambitious single mother, who upsets the dynamic between the other two. One morning, Rose is found dead, and an investigation begins, led by local detective Don (Decker Moody), with suspects that begin with the erratic ex-husband of Rose, Jake (Kyle Smith). The whodunit is played out in calm, measured rhythms that match the small-town pace.

Perhaps a little too measured. *Bubble* (presumably named after the baby doll produced in the factory) is an almost "quaint" murder mystery, and while the unschooled players do all right with their modest roles, and while the HD shooting is efficiently handled, the dutiful, even plodding style of the movie is never laced with any real passion. It's amusing to think that the lead actors are all played by jus' folks like a KFC manager (Debbie), a salon stylist (Misty Dawn), a computer student (Dustin), and--of all things--a real police detective from Parkersburg, West Virginia (Decker Moody), but that doesn't make them any more compelling, unfortunately. In fact, the finale, intended to reveal how and why the murder was committed, seems clumsy and puzzling rather than revelatory.

So, bravo! to Soderbergh and his buds for trying a new tack, for participating in what could become the new paradigm for moving image entertainment and storytelling. It's too bad to say, then, that the *Bubble* effort might be one to pop.

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