

Election

Many readers of this column are, I presume, mature adults who--though they may be interested in movies--would not patronize films focusing on high school. They may or may not be aware that there has been a recent explosion of movies about high school and the teenagers who inhabit them, aimed precisely at the teen market itself, that group that still goes most consistently to big screen shows. A miscellany of such films, like *She's All That*, *Varsity Blues*, *Ten Things I Hate About You*, *The Rage: Carrie 2*, *Cruel Intentions*, *Never Been Kissed*, not to mention the legacy of horror flicks engendered from *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, have peppered local screens the last several months. Countering them all is one singular exception called *Election* which, though it too plays out in an American high school, is utterly grown up in its wry eye and sardonic wit.

Election was made by cool customer and second-time director Alexander Payne (who co-wrote the screenplay with Jim Taylor), who shows us as smart a satiric bent as any American filmmaker in the business. In his first film, *Citizen Ruth*, he beautifully pilloried both sides of the abortion debate without ever denying their humanity. He also got a wonderful performance out of Laura Dern as a totally irresponsible ditz who becomes a reluctant symbol for *both* sides of the abortion controversy, making her by turns funny and pathetic, but always human.

In *Election*, Payne achieves that same kind of balance between the cold shower of tough satire and the warmer flows of real human beings. The result is a delicately heightened reality that is very funny and probably captures more of the real flavor of high school than any of the above mentioned films.

The film takes place in Omaha's George Washington Carver High, where super-perky and hyper-ambitious Tracy Flick (Renee Witherspoon) is running unopposed for senior class president. The student government advisor and all-around decent history teacher, Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick), is leery of Tracy, both because of her fixation on winning and her easy seduction of a friend and fellow teacher--an act that leads to the teacher being divorced and canned. McAllister suggests to easy-going jock Paul Metzler (Chris Klein) that he might run just to give Tracy some competition. When Paul's contrary younger sister Tammy (Jessica Campbell) loses her girlfriend to her own brother, she enters the race to spite them both, running on a basic "student government sucks" slogan.

Poor McAllister tries to keep the now contentious student election on track while trying to keep his own libido in check as he receives attentions from the divorcee of his ex-friend. The desperate and frustrated Tracy strikes out at her opponent by trashing Paul's campaign posters, but avoids punishment when Tammy surprisingly (and for her own special reasons) decides to accept the blame for the attack. The race itself turns out to be a squeaker, with an outcome McAllister cannot accept, so, as official ballot checker, he decides to fudge the totals, thus getting himself into deeper and deeper trouble....

Carver High will ring true to almost anyone who went to a public high school in the last several decades. We have all known budding professional politicians like Tracy

and naturally popular lugs like Paul; we all probably had one dedicated and earnest (and badly dressed) teacher like Jim McAllister. The locales, the hallways, the student assemblies, the very *feel* of Carver High seems so right--not exaggerated or hyped as in so many of today's commercial films and television series. Most of the little things are done well: the school principal is a completely believable, natural guy (not an idiot or a raver), the women of the film are (for once) not Hollywood babes, the student election posters are not professionally drawn, the kid's campaign speeches are flawed perfection. It all works, and I believed in it from the first, all of which makes the film's humor that much richer.

There is much to praise in the performances Payne commands from his actors, too. The script has each of the protagonists over voice a part of their own story, an ironic touch which allows them to both underscore their motivations and reveal their depth of character--or lack of it!

Matthew Broderick--who last stumbled through the vapid *Godzilla*--gets a part worthy of his naive, vulnerable demeanor as the poor, well-meaning schmuck for whom everything goes wrong in the most inevitable way. As the bumbling instructor, he offers a delicious contrast to his most famous role as the know-it-all Ferris Bueller of 1986. Young Chris Klein, as the semi-spaced Paul, becomes the prototype of the good-old-boy who will never have to work too hard but will always be well-liked, the scion of a family which made its dough in cement and who will inherit a comfortable life which will never take him far from Nebraska or allow him to ask the big questions.

The real kick of this picture is Reese Witherspoon, who triumphs as Tracy Flick. Witherspoon is hot right now, having appeared recently as the jaded young sister in *Pleasantville* and as the sweet virgin in *Cruel Intentions*. Here, however, she gets a much riper script to portray the single-minded Tracy. Talk about overcompensation: the kid has no dad, no money, no real friends, but, by God, she'll make it by working three times as hard as anybody and walking over whoever gets in the way. She's a girl with a too-tight perm whose pout will freeze-dry you and whose victory smile can give you hives.

Payne's *Citizen Ruth* was seen by almost no one but this reviewer (I urge you to look for it on video). That's too bad because it made such a delightful mockery of our contemporary troubles. I would hope for a better audience reaction to *Election*, because it deserves to be widely seen--and enjoyed. If I can appeal to that older audience again, the films that Alexander Payne has made so far remind me of nothing so much as an earlier master of American movie satire, Preston Sturges, a brilliant skewerer of our foibles in the 1940's. It is meant as high praise indeed to mention Payne in his company but, for now, he merits it.

(“Election” is rated “R” for a couple of sex scenes and sprinkled obscenities.)

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