

Heights

For the second time in three months, an intriguing ensemble film makes it on to Washington screens. *Crash* (reviewed in May) was a complex, intersecting dance of the lives of about a dozen people over 36 hours in Los Angeles. The new *Heights* is also an intricate, cross-cutting saga--this time trailing five denizens of Manhattan over a 24-hour period. The difference in content and tone is striking: instead of *Crash's* racial lacerations, varied class levels, and volatile ethnic mix, *Heights* looks at cool, contemporary, white New Yorkers of achievement and position and their amorous misadventures.

Major plot elements turn around Diana (Glenn Close), a major theater star on the verge of a new production of *Macbeth*. Her daughter, Isabel (Elizabeth Banks) is a promising photographer who is both contemplating her upcoming marriage with a rising lawyer, Jonathan (James Marsden), and hoping for a significant magazine shoot. Add young actor Alec (Jesse Bradford), auditioning before Diana for a possible part, and Peter (John Light), a journalist who is promoting a major photo artist, and you have this complex Manhattan cocktail (the screenplay is by Amy Fox, from her play).

This quintet both comforts and confronts each other or, at times, just grazes against one another. Diana worries about her debut and the after-party; Isabel, with a chance for an overseas assignment, worries about her prospective marriage. Troubled Jonathan is struggling with a secret from his past which Peter seems to be trying to uncover, and Alec, though Diana has come on to him, has a fire that burns for another.

Their game is played out in sometimes surprising, sometimes predictable turns, but the actors are uniformly suited to their roles and handle them with grace. Even more graceful is the studied direction by Chris Terrio, directing his first feature, who eschews every potential moment for histrionics (there are several) and plays his scenes instead with careful understatement and naturalness. A crucial, dramatic moment, for example, where the relationship between Isabel and Jonathan breaks down, avoids sweat and tears for a quiet epiphany. Another recognition scene, one fraught with portent for several characters, is handled with a calm restraint that makes it resonate the more.

All the performers convince, but the standout here is the rising Elizabeth Banks (last seen in *Seabiscuit* as Jeff Bridges' second wife). She shines as an alert and decent young woman carefully calibrating her emotions and hopes between her ambitions for a career, the omnipresent example of her *monstre sacré* mother, and her hesitant, routine boyfriend. She makes this woman, in a mere 24-hour period, a wholly rounded personality you care about. (*The film is rated "R" for mature themes.*)

(July 2005)

