

Six Degrees of Separation

“Six degrees of separation” is a tag line for the trendy adage that states that six--only six--human connections exist between any one person on the planet and every other person. If only the correct combination of personalities can be found, everybody is linked to everybody else.

This conceit, equal parts whimsical, curious, and heartening, is introduced late in the new movie *Six Degrees of Separation* by its rich and “smart” protagonist, Ouisa Kittredge (Stockard Channing) as she talks to her uncomprehending daughter. Here and elsewhere in John Guare’s script for the film (adapted from his 1990 Broadway play), we are ironically shown how rarely his collection of upscale New Yorkers ever really do connect. *Six Degrees of Separation* is a problematical picture, as it was a problem play. Its tone shifts. It tosses off ideas, not all of them fully formed. But it remains a motion picture of considerable wit and provocation, one worth your time.

Ouisa and her husband, Flan (Donald Sutherland), a would-be artist who instead conducts a kind of insider trading in art masterworks, live a handsome if superficial existence on Central Park East. The view from their condo is great, but their rapport with their college-age kids is not. Into their life stumbles Paul (Will Smith), an articulate and winsome black youth who seems to have been mugged and says he knows their children. Paul also claims to be the son of Sidney Poitier, serves up a gourmet pasta, and offers elaborate exegeses of J.D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield. He also is a complete fake, as the Kittredges later learn when they find out that he has similarly beguiled their friends Kitty and Larkin (Mary Beth Hurt and Bruce Davison) and a local doctor (Richard Masur), all of whose kids know each other.

Paul, as it turns out, is a completely self-constructed persona, a young man of no discernible background who has--for sexual favors--learned all about a batch of spoiled rich kids from one of their kind (Anthony Michael Hall). What is puzzling about the Kittredges’ and others’ reaction to Paul’s duping of them is that they are only initially upset and angry. What they really want is to know more about this fascinating and unlikely creature who stole into their lives and, as one character says, “opened up a whole new world to us.”

Told in flashbacks as the Kittredges regale friends and clients about its latest twist, the tale is an intricate one, rife with themes and theses. *New Yorker* critic Mimi Kramer, writing about the original play, called it a mixture of “satire, social commentary, comedy of manners, family drama, literary criticism and academic parody,” and the film script too juggles with all these elements. One’s reaction to it is likewise complex. One can imagine Washingtonians of means (especially with New York antecedents) both identifying with the Kittredges (their conversation, their possessions, their taste) and ridiculing them as trendy, pathetic snobs.

Crucial is the catalyst Paul: are you as a filmgoer captured by him (even knowing he is a fraud) or, even more importantly, do you believe that the Kittredges would be taken in by him? Will Smith is a winning fellow, and he certainly shows an urbane smoothness to go along with the vulnerability he evidences as TV’s “Fresh Prince.” Yet I cannot finally believe in him and do not feel that Ouisa and Flan--credulous though they

may be--would swallow his story whole. There is a kind of thinness, a lack of gravity about the too-practiced Smith that undercuts his credibility. I just couldn't buy his name-dropping of Becket and Jung and his interminable "thesis."

Stockard Channing (who reprises her Broadway role) and Donald Sutherland expertly incarnate the knowing but testy Kittredges. Channing, who gets to show more development and self-awareness in her role, is particularly effective. It is Ouisa who, although she has been dining out on the Paul story for weeks, tearily insists that she "will not turn (him) into an anecdote." Brittle and oh-so-clevah at first, Channing attains some poignancy as she tries to maintain a relationship with the ever-more-troubled Paul. Her marathon phone conversation with him near the film's end is tough and touching--she becomes a mother trying to console a child. Sutherland's character is blunter, less nuanced, but he does a decent job of portraying a sophisticated hustler and self-admitted "gambler." The film's cast is a large and varied one, not always used to best effect (the children, for example, have no dimension and are uniformly snotty and vile). Talent like Davison, Hurt and Ian McKellen (as a South African financier) aren't on long enough or aren't given the lines to shine. It's the Kittredges' and Paul's show.

Director Fred Schepisi maneuvers his cast around efficiently, sets up the many jokes well, and keeps the busy plot moving briskly. As is often done with filmed plays, he "opens out" the action somewhat, punctuating his interiors with New York aerials, street scenes, and settings of high culture (the Met, the Sistine Chapel, etc.). While perhaps useful as "scene changes," these sequences are not essential.

What is essential to *Six Degrees of Separation* is dialogue and its performers' delivery of it. In language both sardonic and serious, the movie mocks liberal guilt, plays with innocence, gives credence to personal transformation. It presents no consistent, easily digestible argument, but offers a messier human business. Yet tinctures of its character stick, and the flavor of its lines linger. I recommend it most as a film worth arguing with and arguing about.

(This film is rated "R" for adult situations and language.)

(December 1994)