

Smoke

Smoke, by Chinese-American filmmaker Wayne Wang and novelist Paul Auster, is a slice of Brooklyn life centered around a tobacco shop. If shown in Europe, it would be entirely appropriate to light up a weed during the film, and, in fact, *Smoke* has a flavor of the European art-house movie. It's a small and grungy picture (like the shop it portrays) and its style is loose and slack, but its reason for being are its actors.

Smoke does not have a single-minded plot, but leisurely traces several loosely connected lives which intersect at the humble Brooklyn tobacco shop of Auggie Wren (Harvey Keitel). His customers include a now-blocked novelist, Paul Benjamin (William Hurt), whose life is saved by Rashid Cole (Harold Perrineau), a young black man trying to reconnect with his estranged father Cyrus (Forest Whitaker). Keitel has his own estrangement, from ex-girlfriend Ruby (Stockard Channing), who tries to enlist his help to salvage their druggie daughter Felicity (Ashley Judd). The film, very smoothly, even sinuously, links these lives together through cool, composed episodes and soft, lingering dissolves that swirl on the screen like the smoke from the shop's cigars.

The absence of one compelling plot line does not mean there are no stories. Auster, author of "Leviathan" and "The Music of Chance," suggests that the title of the film is figurative as well as literal since "a lot of talk in the movie is a smoke screen, the smoke that obscures vision, that obscures understanding."

Thus, blowing smoke at each other, we have the quirky Auggie, who has photographed his shop from the same spot every morning for 14 years ("I can never take a vacation," he laments). It is in one of these photos that Paul rediscovers his dead wife, killed in random street violence. The novelist's befriending of Rashid leads to the youth's working in the tobacco shop and inadvertently killing Auggie's dream of a big score. A cache of \$5,000 passes through almost everyone's hands--to land where it might actually do some good.

Perhaps the most affecting of numerous affecting episodes is a wonderful sequence which director Wang runs behind the closing credits--mutely--wherein Auggie pretends to be the long-lost grandson of a blind black woman at Christmas time. The sequence replicates a tale Keitel narrates (wonderfully) to Hurt at the film's close, a tale Mr. Auster used as the grain for his screenplay.

Wayne Wang, whose last outing was another solid ensemble effort, *The Joy Luck Club*, gets the best out of his stellar cast. This is a film made for actors, with good, rich lines to speak. Keitel lowers his intensity register for this picture and is wholly convincing as the hard-headed, soft-hearted tobacconist. Hurt, who has had a bit of a losing streak the last few years, fittingly incarnates the earnest, wounded novelist, the kind of part he handled well in films like *The Accidental Tourist*. Stockard Channing is right on the money as a worried mother-floozy, and Forest Whitaker nicely embodies a testy, reluctant parent who wants to bury a sordid past. Only Perrineau, making his film debut, seemed off-kilter to me in this otherwise delicious cast. His look and demeanor appeared just too mature

and polished for a kid with a troubled background, a rare false note in a motion picture full of perfect pitch.

("Smoke" is rated "R" for language and runs 112 minutes.)

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