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Published on Friday, April 10, 2009 - 7:11am

Capone hits the indie circuit--THE MYSTERIES OF PITTSBURGH and GIGANTIC!!!

Hey, folks. Capone in Chicago here, with two smaller films that may be sneaking into your local art house theaters (if they aren't there already). Both are a version of a love story--one is about simple people in a complicated situation; the other is about complicated people in a simple scenario.

THE MYSTERIES OF PITTSBURGH

It's nearly impossible to wrap my brain around the fact that the writer-director of DODGEBALL is the same man responsible for this wandering but occasionally interesting tale of a young man trying to figure out which road to take after college. Sound a little like The Graduate? I guess you could look at it that way, only without the style, humor or timelessness of that film. Imagine the graduate if Mr. Robinson was bisexual and also attempted to have sex with Benjamin. Then you're starting to get the drift of THE MYSTERIES OF PITTSBURGH...sort of.

The writer-director in question is Rawson Marshall Thurber, and he relays to us the story of Art Bechstein (Jon Foster from THE DOOR IN THE FLOOR), whose father (Nick Nolte) is a well-known gangster type in Pittsburgh. Art is supposed to be studying to become a stock broker in New York, but he seems more interested in exploring the people who drift into his life, both at his summer job at a book store and a beautiful woman named Jane (Sienna Miller), who he meets at a swanky party. Art is having casual, meaningless sex with a coworker (Mena Suvari), while slowly falling in love with Jane. Jane has a complicated relationship with Cleveland (Peter Sarsgaard, who can play the sweetest characters imaginable, but also pulls of scary a little too easily; here he does both), who seems to take Art under his wing to a degree. You can't help but wonder if Cleveland is keeping his potential rival close or whether he's attracted to Art or, perhaps, both. But Sarsgaard might be the most inspired reason to see this film if any of this sounds mildly interesting to you.

Turns out Cleveland works for a rival gangster in the city, so his motives for getting close to Art are all the more complicated and suspect. Meanwhile Art and Jane are growing close as well, until soon a love triangle in the truest sense of the expression forms rather nicely with these three at the points. Foster is good here, but we've seen this kind of distant observer character before. He watches these far more interesting people do sometimes-extraordinary things, but when he steps into their world, everything gets ridiculous and complicated. The Bertolucci film THE DREAMERS covered some of the same ground as



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Pittsburgh, but in far more captivating and exotic ways. Pittsburgh is hardly the setting for anything alluring, but the film almost pulls it off thanks to some strong performances.

Sienna Miller is an actress I'm still on the fence about. There's no denying she's sensationally lovely, but I don't know if I've seen her in the right role to determine whether she's a talented actress. I did like her in LAYER CAKE, CASSANOVA, FACTORY GIRL, and INTERVIEW (probably her best work to date), but what she did in ALFIE, STARDUST, or THE EDGE OF LOVE did not impress me terribly. In Pittsburgh, she delivers a layered, complicated performance as an alcoholic party girl who almost seems to seek out troubled men. If the film was written a bit better, I think Miller would have had more to work with, but she's not quite strong enough to save weak material.

Still, I was always curious where these spinning lives were going to land, and Sarsgaard is just the right amount of bizarre to keep things interesting. I'm not sure I'd call this a recommendation of THE MYSTERIES OF PITTSBURGH, but if you're a fan or curious about some of these actors, you'll probably enjoy a lot of this movie. There are some extraneous subplots (especially Suvari's insane behavior after Art breaks up with her) that just plain old annoy the hell out of me. But for every unnecessary element, you get perfectly measured work from Nolte, who has some of the film's best lines. Director Thurber isn't trying to capture the blue-collar feel or people of Pittsburgh; that has nothing to do with this. If anything, he's trying to illustrate that there is more to these industrial cities than industry. There are people attempting to at least pretend their lives are exciting and amped up. But in the end, they all come to the same realization: if my life were really that exciting, I wouldn't be living in Pittsburgh.

GIGANTIC

The offbeat humor and dry performances are what keeps the film moving forward, but it's the absolute perfection of this strange love story that captured me. There are a lot of men out there (and I'm sure more than a handful of women as well) who are well aware of the hypnotic powers of Zoey Deschanel. She is quirk personified, but she's also strangely beautiful and seems like just about the coolest gal on God's earth. Although I'd seen her in films like ALMOST FAMOUS, MANIC, and THE GOOD GIRL, it was her stark and hypnotic performance in David Gordon Green's ALL THE REAL GIRLS where I knew I needed her to be my special friend. There's simply no way you could watch her in that film and not fall in love with her with everything your sad soul has to offer. Since then, she became the Quirk Girl in such films as ELF, WINTER PASSING, LIVE FREE OR DIE, and most recently in YES MAN. She's even made crap--how she landed up in THE HAPPENING will remain an eternal mystery to me. And based on what I've heard about her summer release (500) DAYS OF SUMMER, she's going to invent new ways to capture my heart.

Until then, we have GIGANTIC, a tiny and perfect love story from first-time writer-director Matt Aselton, in which Deschanel plays a young woman named Happy, a spoiled rich girl who possesses none of the cliché trappings of said rich girls but does have some of the cluelessness

about what to do with her life. Her father (John Goodman) will never let his little girl suffer, so about once a year when she changes her mind about what career she's like to pursue, he indulges her. I haven't felt this way about Goodman outside of a Coen Brothers movie, but he is the absolute greatest thing about this movie, delivering off-handed, stone-cold killer remarks that capture the very essence of every insufferable person he comes into contact with, including his own beloved daughters.

Gigantic actually focuses on Brian (Paul Dano from LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE and THERE WILL BE BLOOD), a mattress salesman, who also comes from wealthy stock (his elderly parents are played by Ed Asner and Jane Alexander). He has two much older brothers, both of whom are extremely successful, but Brian is a little less secure because instead of finding ways to improve his lot in life, he spends all his free time focusing on his life's passion--to adopt a baby from China, which somehow manages not to be as creepy as it sounds. When Brian and Happy meet, it's clear that these two not only have very little in common, but their approach to living is the exact opposite. Happy seems willing to try or see anything; Brian seems less capable of simply going with the flow or being spontaneous. Yet they work well together, filling in each other social blanks. His long-term commitment to the adoption process is something that she admires and is terrified by because she has never held onto a dream (or a job, for that matter) for nearly that long.

As much as the film is filled with varying degrees of eccentric characters, it doesn't feel like an attempt to pummel you with wackiness. The strange qualities of these people have been carefully woven into their fabric rather than worn on their sleeves or on their heads, like a funny winter hat with floppy earflaps. What I found most impressive about GIGANTIC was the subtle degree of sophistication that director Aselton shows. What starts out as a movie about Brian's largely uneventful live (punctuated by seemingly unprovoked attacks by a homeless guy) turns into an examination of Happy's far-too-fluid lifestyle. And the closer Brian's baby reality becomes, the more Happy withdraws. It's a fascinating dynamic to watch, and these two great young actors really pull it off. Dano continues to be a fun and unpredictable actor to follow since his early work in L.I.E., THE GIRL NEXT DOOR, and THE KING. I'm never sure what approach he's going to take or how truly trippy he's willing to get. Here, there's a power to his commitment to both his adoption and the relationship. It's a workman's effort to keep up with both near-impossible situations, but he handles it with style and without feeling overly noble about either pursuit.

GIGANTIC is a very different kind of young love story, compared to something a little more traditional, but no less fun, like NICK AND NORAH'S INFINITE PLAYLIST, but it's impossible to take your eyes off of these people and their adventures together.

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