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Offbeat Directors' Sophistication Isn't Always Accompanied by Emotional Maturity

By *DAVID STERRITT*

List: [Must-See Movies](#) by Standout Independent Directors

Everyone wants to monkey with structure," says my Hofstra University professor friend Phillip Lopate.

Neither of us finds that surprising. The heroes of today's aspiring filmmakers aren't the Old Masters like John Ford and Howard Hawks, who plugged their genius into time-tested patterns, but mavericks like Quentin Tarantino and Paul Thomas Anderson, whose most influential movies -- Pulp Fiction (1994), Boogie Nights (1997) -- make cinematic time and space seem as malleable as plot twists and character psychology.

This doesn't mean that offbeat, experimental approaches are just the ticket for wide audiences. Today, as in the past, the most marketable commodities (Shark Tale, Shall We Dance) are the most formulaic. Even the more successful independent-minded movies usually earn only a fraction of those films' profits: For example, the indie teenpic Napoleon Dynamite earned a bit more than \$40-million in its first 19 weeks of release, while the studio animation Shark Tale grossed almost \$182-million in its first three weeks. But critics who detect an "ignominious, irreversible decline" of film as an art -- as Susan Sontag does in "The Decay of Cinema," her gloomy, influential 1996 essay -- undervalue the growing number of filmmakers with adventurous, risk-taking attitudes.

Not to mention the computer and digital technologies that -- along with trusty, inexpensive 16mm celluloid -- help these cinéastes realize new visual ideas on surprisingly modest budgets. Shane Carruth reportedly spent about \$7,000 to make Primer, for

instance, and Jonathan Caouette made *Tarnation* for a crazily low \$218.32, stitching his autobiographical documentary together from film and video material he'd been collecting since childhood.

In sum, there's no shortage of individualistic filmmakers working to keep cinema fresh. What does justify some of Sontag's pessimism is the problem many of them have in bolstering their visual ideas with strong emotional resonance. Young filmmakers are often too, well, young to have experienced the world in genuinely adult ways. The best of them compensate for that through empathy and imagination. Less gifted ones make works that dazzle the eye while leaving the soul regrettably untouched.

That said, an array of promising talents are displaying their wares this season. Among those attracting the most attention are David O. Russell with *I [Heart] Huckabees*, a philosophical comedy; Carruth with *Primer*, a science-fiction film so intricate that he himself seems somewhat puzzled by it; and Alexander Payne with *Sideways*, the movie most likely to succeed on both critical and commercial levels.

Huckabees centers on Albert (Jason Schwartzman), a young environmentalist at war with a corporate yuppie, Brad (Jude Law), whose superstores want to gobble up land Albert is trying to preserve. More important, Albert thinks he's being plagued by coincidences, mostly involving an African stranger he keeps running into for no intelligible reason, and he suspects that they might have a mystical meaning that lies in their very mysteriousness. So he hires a duo (Dustin Hoffman, Lily Tomlin) who call themselves "existential detectives" and claim to crack cases via their deep understanding of the cosmos. Other characters include the yuppie's gorgeous girlfriend (Naomi Watts) and a French existential detective (Isabelle Huppert) who's been seduced by the dark side.

Huckabees monkeys with structure right from its logo-adorned title, which is at once a satirical joke -- the money-hungry superstore chain, *Huckabees*, is a villain of the story -- and a catchy touch that helps market the movie itself. It's a clever picture, with those existential detectives sniffing out cosmic

connections, and a bold one, interrogating Jungian ideas (conveyed through dialogue and special effects) about chance and synchronicity.

Since it offers so much to chew on, you'd think Huckabees would be welcomed by thoughtful critics eager for movies more substantial than *The Polar Express* and *Seed of Chucky*. Yet many have been skeptical. The smart *New York Times* reviewer Manohla Dargis lauds its "astonishingly good humor" and says "it's *Fahrenheit 9/11* for the screwball set," but the equally smart *New York* magazine reviewer Peter Rainer complains of the "sheer volume of intellectual dither" it vainly counts on for comic energy. I side with the skeptics. The movie gave me no emotion stronger than mild curiosity, morphing into impatience for the story to end.

My disappointment with *Huckabees* aside, I applaud Russell for standing apart from the Hollywood herd. He did this most bravely with his debut feature, *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), a pitch-dark comedy portraying the suburban household as a physical and psychological trap. *Flirting With Disaster* (1996) continued his sardonic dissection of family dynamics, and *Three Kings* (1999) memorably combined political fact with tragicomic fiction. I also admire Russell's willingness to take his time, carefully developing each project instead of racing from picture to picture like, say, the increasingly dismaying Woody Allen.

Still and all, being a top-drawer artist means knowing how to match your ambitions to your talents, and *Huckabees* shows that Russell hasn't yet developed the filmmaking savvy to juggle so many narrative and intellectual elements. I suspect he was so eager to explore philosophical issues that the project became a mind-teasing puzzle for him to solve, rather than the investigation of intertwined emotional and intellectual values it set out to be. Russell needs to temper his intelligence with more subtle attunement to basic human feelings. If he manages that, he'll make a movie I can really [heart].

Primer was a big winner at this year's Sundance Film Festival, taking the Grand Jury prize as well as the Alfred P. Sloan Award for filmmaking that promotes interest in science. Written, produced,

edited, and directed by Carruth, who also stars in it and composed the music, it makes him a leading candidate for multitasker of the year. Or should that be overachiever?

Whatever the verdict, everyone agrees that *Primer* is a hard movie to agree on, starting with the most fundamental question of all: What's it supposed to mean? The main characters are computer wonks who start experimenting with a weird energy-making device they've concocted in a garage. The gizmo turns out to be a sort of time machine that operates by creating a duplicate of whoever's inside it. The guys want to exploit it for advance stock-market information, but the setup proves more erratic than they expected -- the time-travel appears to be making them ill, the doppelgängers are impossible to keep track of -- and the protagonists are kept in confusion for much of the story.

If the characters are confused, it's a good bet the audience will be, too, and that was definitely the case at the jam-packed Toronto International Film Festival screening where I saw *Primer*. More surprisingly, the filmmaker himself seemed perplexed when he discussed it afterward. At one point he explained an aspect of the plot, then paused and added, "At least, I think so." Then he paused again and said, "It makes sense -- doesn't it?"

I don't think mystifying viewers (or himself) is what Carruth originally had in mind, and he claims that *Primer* is logical and coherent if you think about it enough. Deep down, he says, it's not a freewheeling fantasy but a moral tale about "trust," focusing on young professionals ("basically kids") facing moral and ethical questions for the first time in their lives. Carruth's intentions and awards notwithstanding, *Primer* will be a hard sell for spectators who don't attend multiplexes to explore moral questions or bend their brains into pretzels figuring out plotlines. I esteem its audacity and welcome Carruth as a bright newcomer to the take-no-prisoners school of high-IQ cinema. At the same time, though, I'm not convinced he has the narrative breadth and emotional depth he'll need to be a major presence on the indie scene.

Many young filmmakers "don't know how to tell stories," says

Lewis Cole, a film professor I know at Columbia University, "because they've grown up with years of [merely entertaining] movies where narrative is assumed, not developed so it really communicates." The perplexities of plot, fuzziness of dialogue, and dearth of female characters in *Primer* point to Carruth as a potentially fine talent who, like Russell, still has a lot of emotional growing up to do.

Of all today's youngish, quirky directors, the one most clearly on the road to lasting, high-profile success is Alexander Payne, whose politically brave *Citizen Ruth* (1996), tough-minded *Election* (1999), and crowd-pleasing Jack Nicholson vehicle *About Schmidt* (2002) have paved the way for this year's *Sideways*, a solid hit at the Toronto festival and the New York Film Festival, where it held the prestigious closing-night slot.

Payne and his regular writing partner, Jim Taylor, have the most Hollywood clout of the filmmakers I've been discussing (you can't sign a Nicholson without plenty of that) and also the most changeable way of balancing intellect and emotion. *Election* is an amazingly trenchant movie about the scheming, manipulative practices our schools teach us to call democracy. *About Schmidt* is harder to pin down, though. It sets up a situation where the disillusioned title character has unprecedented chances to discard his life of shallow self-delusion and give a dose of raw, refreshing truth to his friends and relatives -- but chooses not to, instead finding solace in a sentimental moment guaranteed to fill moviegoers' eyes with tears.

That finale made me suspect that Payne might have turned from social criticism to commercial-hit making, and I hoped *Sideways* would return to the more biting attitudes of *Election*. It turns out that *Sideways* is neither an advance nor a retreat, but (true to its title) a sideways maneuver -- again laying the groundwork for a fierce critique of the American way, and again letting the hero off the sociological hook in time for an upbeat ending.

Life hasn't been treating the main character, Miles (Paul Giamatti), with much fairness lately. Still reeling from a divorce, he finds himself vacationing for a week with an old friend, Jack (Thomas

Haden Church), whose wedding is just days away. The good news is that they're visiting California vineyard country, which is close to heaven for Miles, a lover of fine wines. The bad news is that his connoisseurship crossed long ago into alcoholism, wrecking his marriage and his hoped-for writing career. The friend he's traveling with doesn't help, since he sees every vintage-wine tasting as just another chance to put on a buzz and pick up a girl -- hardly the right companion for Miles, who needs to do some serious self-examination if he's ever going to clean up his act.

Payne and Taylor haven't lost their finely tuned ear for the aphorisms of middle-class life (Jack on love: "Come on, man, you've got her on the hook. Reel her in."), and here they add the jargon of the oenophile (Miles sniffing a glass of red: "There's just like the faintest soupçon of asparagus"). Equally important, their luck with on-target casting is better than ever.

Giamatti, who was so brilliant in last year's *American Splendor*, portrays Miles as a stew of complicated feelings, stirred by love-hate relationships with everything from the books he's tried writing to the wine he can't help abusing. This kind of character requires an actor to make emotional U-turns in very tight spaces, and Giamatti does so with an economy bordering on brilliance -- regaling Jack with a veritable ode to the vintage they're drinking, for instance, and then adding, "Are you chewing gum?" with the timing (and exasperation) of a master comedian. Church is a first-rate find as Jack, a tenth-rate actor with the toothiest smile in town, and Sandra Oh does her best work yet as a woman Jack loves and leaves. Versatile enough for movies as different as *The Red Violin* and *The Princess Diaries*, she has the needed flexibility for a character who is strong and lovable when things are going well, then vulnerable and sympathetic when they aren't. Appearing in four movies coming out next year, she's definitely a rising star.

With its excellent acting and pitch-perfect dialogue, I think *Sideways* confirms Payne and Taylor as the young filmmaking team most likely to please large audiences in years, maybe decades, to come. I also think that entails a sacrifice, though, since neither this movie nor its predecessor, *About Schmidt*, keeps up the unstinting critique of American ideologies that makes *Election*

and *Citizen Ruth*, a tragicomic look at abortion politics, such special movies.

If the gifted Payne and Taylor continue to handle their complex subjects with psychological kid gloves, and if Russell and Carruth keep pursuing highly cerebral interests, the job of pushing cinema's envelope and audiences' buttons will pass to filmmakers with even more audacity. I'm thinking of David Gordon Green, whose *Undertow* explores America's heart of darkness through a story of deadly domestic rivalry; Lodge H. Kerrigan, whose *Keane* probes the psyche of a deeply disturbed yet deeply sympathetic man; Todd Solondz, whose *Palindromes* uses multiple actresses to portray a single character caught in a dysfunctional family and a society to match; and Caouette, whose *Tarnation* is a courageous act of no-holds-barred introspection, and a movie so peculiar that it's hard to imagine what he could do for an encore.

These are directors with visions that are often troubling but always from the heart. Here's hoping they don't forfeit their cinematic pluck for the sake of safer, more predictable careers.

David Sterritt, film critic of *The Christian Science Monitor*, is a film professor on the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University and at Columbia University, and the author, most recently, of *Screening the Beats: Media Culture and the Beat Sensibility* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

MUST-SEE MOVIES BY STANDOUT INDEPENDENT DIRECTORS

David O. Russell

Spanking the Monkey, 1994. Caring for his injured mother at home when he'd rather be pursuing his pre-med studies at MIT, a young man enters a tragicomic Oedipal bind with no clear escape route.

Three Kings, 1999. Hunting for treasure after the first Persian Gulf war, a small band of American soldiers runs across rebellious Iraqi civilians caught between Saddam Hussein's wrath and the U.S. military's hypocrisy. George Clooney, Mark Wahlberg, and Ice Cube star.

Alexander Payne

Citizen Ruth, 1996. Lifelong loser Ruth Stoops, uncompromisingly played by Laura Dern as a glue-sniffing ignoramus, gets pregnant and becomes a pawn in power games over abortion rights. Sad, hilarious, and scary by turns.

Election, 1999. A forthcoming vote for student-body president catalyzes a high-school version of Washington-style politics, complicated by personality

dynamics and sexual imbroglios. One of the sharpest satires in recent memory.

Todd Solondz

Welcome to the Dollhouse, 1995. Solondz's first major film chronicles the travails of Dawn Wiener, a seventh-grade girl who can't figure out why the world seems such an inhospitable place. Heather Matarazzo is inimitable as the unhappy heroine.

Happiness, 1998. Don't believe the ironic title -- it's anything but as three sisters deal with obnoxious would-be lovers, quarreling parents, and a pedophile husband. Dylan Baker takes top acting honors as a highly unstable psychiatrist.

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