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'Ordinary People' examines family relationships

By Pete Schmitz and Jennifer Bauman

Schmitz: *Ordinary People*, Robert Redford's directorial debut about the dark side of the upper middle class family life, is one of this year's best-made films. But I left the theatre feeling angry despite the movie's splendid acting, artful photography, and sensitive musical score.

The problem with *Ordinary People* is its story. While it is refreshing to see Conrad overcome his suicidal tendencies (stemming from his inability to cope with the death of his brother who drowned while they were out sailing), I was distressed by the subtle blame put on the boy's mother for many of his problems.

movie review

The problem with "momism" in American movies is nothing new. What is different is that before the 70's moms were portrayed as domineering, over-protective, love-starved martyrs.

After social scientists and artists made it clear to mothers that they should lay off their kids and develop their own interests, the cinema provided us with a new kind of mother who is cold, detached, and unashamedly selfish.

This is exemplified by Jane Fonda in *California Suite*, Geraldine Page in *Interiors*, and Ingrid Bergman in *Autumn Sonata*. In *Luna*, Jill Clayburgh's character represents both the indulgent and aloof mother. In *Ordinary People*, Beth (portrayed by Mary Tyler Moore), is given this same kind of double-maternal exposure.

In the flashbacks, Beth's warm and seductive manners toward Buck, the dead son, are contrasted to her coldness toward Conrad, portrayed by Timothy

Hutton. One gets the impression that Buck metaphorically drowns in his mother's loving indulgence, while Conrad is driven to the double edged blades, him that cuts into his heart.

I'm not claiming that everything is blamed on Beth. Indeed, Conrad must deal with insensitive school chums as well as a pushy swimming coach. We even witness Donald Sutherland, as the father, bumping awkwardly with his son early in the movie.

But why are the father and son allowed to grow while the mother is not? If the family's problems are not blamed mainly on the mother, then why does the script become so focused on her psychopathology? And why are Beth's emotional shortcomings merely explained by her mother's rigidity?

What most depresses me is that blam-

ing mothers in film ignores the social factors that make them and their families miserable. *Ordinary People* ends with the father and son together, but in corporate suburbia America, it's going to take more than a hipster psychiatrist and Beth's absence to help Conrad and his father.

Bauman: The momism manifest in *Ordinary People* arises mainly from the film's conclusion. Up to that time, there are attempts to show Beth as a victim rather than a villain.

Beth's emotional distance, her emphasis on keeping up appearances at the expense of honesty and affection in the family, are easy to understand after seeing her peers. Beth and these other corporate wives are highly susceptible to the dictates of Madison

Avenue, and their compliance with consumer trends are sometimes important to their husband's success.

When Calvin tells Beth that the way to deal with a difficult repairman is to "charm him," it is clear that her husband has learned to rely on Beth's attractiveness and her social finesse to solve problems. Cultivating appearances has become the focus of Beth's life.

Though none of this particularly endears Beth to us, it helps exonerate her. But late in the film, when Conrad hugs Beth, and she is so emotionally impotent that she cannot respond at all, she suddenly seems more like a caricature than a real person. This last portion of the film completely destroys the three-dimensional character that Moore builds with her fine performance.



Donald Sutherland portrays the father of a suicidal son, Timothy Hutton, in the movie *Ordinary People*, also starring Mary Tyler Moore. The film was directed by Robert Redford.

Except for the unfortunate resolution, *Ordinary People* really is not out to pin the blame on anyone. It is shown that Conrad's problems come within, and the solutions, likewise, must come from him. Conrad's initiative in tackling his anxieties makes a positive statement about adolescence. It's too bad that the R rating of the film (on the basis of a few four-letter words) will keep some teenagers from seeing *Ordinary People*.

Hutton, Moore, and Sutherland portray the Jarretts with skill and restraint. The role of Conrad's analyst (Judd Hirsch) could be dismissed as a trite stereotype were it not for the spark between Hutton and Hirsch that gives life to their sessions.

In a film which much of the interaction comes from repressed gestures and glances, details are important. And these actors all capably handle the difficult job of fleshing out their characters in the time available to them.

Somehow the film implies that we will be astounded that sometimes affluent WASPs are unhappy. But this myth has been debunked long ago.

Allen's latest movie 'piercingly funny' but serious

By Tom Prentiss

Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* is an artistically different work than previous Allen films. While piercingly funny in parts, this message-laden film is a thought-provoking view of the world and Woody Allen through Woody himself.

While the humor in the film will be apparent to those past the level of "The Dukes of Hazzard," the messages—although clear to identify—are far more challenging to answer.

movie review

Stardust Memories requires more mental capacity from the audience than the usual vapid films and it does offer an interesting glimpse into the mind of a film genius.

In some respects, *Stardust Memories* is a personal purge of sorts as Allen lashes out through his character, Sandy Bates, at injustices and absurdities around him. Yet, he saves his most painful lashing for his easiest target—himself.

As Bates, Allen has created a character in his own image. Bates is a critically-acclaimed filmmaker and comedian. He is caught up in the paradox of being a comic genius who is adored by his public but finds little enjoyment any more out of being funny in a world wrought with human suffering.

Throughout the film, Bates is searching. Although his forte is comedy, he chastises others for closing their eyes to reality and not concerning themselves with the misfortunes of others.

Allen portrays Bates as a realist in a world of people willing to laugh at any-



Sandy Bates, played by Woody Allen, discusses running away with Daisy, played by Jessica Harper, in Allen's new movie, *Stardust Memories*.

thing. A proposed musical comedy on the Guyana mass suicides forces the audience to wonder if comedy sometimes violates its poetic license.

He judges his life's worth to be parasitic. He lives off the laughs he evokes, but offers nothing of any substance to those who are troubled. Funny jokes are not enough.

In the midst of his artistic metamorphosis, Bates must attend a weekend film festival of his works. There he is besieged by fans, cultists, and informed and uninformed film afficiandos. The latter set includes a woman who has just completed the "definitive cinematic study of Gummo Marx"

As with all Allen films, *Stardust*

Memories comes complete with the complex, psychological relationships with women that few can depict as well as Allen.

Bates is having an affair with Isabel, a mature, married French woman with two children, played by Marie Christine-Barrault. Despite her visits during the film festival weekend, Bates becomes smitten by a girl named Daisy who reminds him of an old flame—Dorrie.

Daisy, played effortlessly by Jessica Harper, is a concert cellist. Dorrie, in a haunting performance by Charlotte Rampling, is cast as the designated female neurotic no Allen film is complete without. But, credit Allen with creating Dorrie as more complex than previous

female characters.

Students of cinema will notice the heavy influence of Ingmar Bergman in the film—including an intensely gripping scene of Bates' last visit with Dorrie.

Although content with his relationship with Isabel, Bates longs for Daisy because of memories that she evokes within him for Dorrie. Again, Allen shows the intricacies and frailties of human relationships in stark realism.

Allen has always been preoccupied with sex, religion and death and concentrates on the latter the most.

Bates informs us that only when death becomes a reality do we begin to understand the meaning of life. For Bates this meaning is represented in a stunningly, simple scene with Dorrie.

With Dorrie lying on the apartment floor glancing through the *New York Times*, and Louis Armstrong playing "Stardust" in the background, Bates finds something he has been searching for.

This simple message of human communication is, perhaps, the most satisfying part of the film.

Gordon Willis' black and white cinematography is again as superb as it was in *Manhattan*. Some will be irritated by the lack of color, but the delicate lighting effects Allen sought would have been unobtainable otherwise.

Although *Stardust Memories* is a film of Woody Allen, by Woody Allen, it doesn't necessarily appeal only to Woody Allen. Those who have criticized it as excessively self-indulgent have missed the universal appeal in many of its messages.

While it is possible to miss some of Allen's humor, in *Stardust Memories*, Allen asks serious questions behind a comic mask that should provoke some thought from the attentive viewer.

Stardust Memories is playing at the Stuart Theatre.