

The Sardonic



KING

'Election'
director brings
film spotlight
to Nebraska

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Editor's note: In this weekly series, we explore the lives and work of notable Nebraska artists of the 20th century.

A pregnant woman gets charged for hazardous vapor inhalation. A man is wrought with jealousy and hunts down his lover's boyfriend. A teacher taints a high school election.

None of these things is funny — that is, until you see an Alexander Payne film.

In his films "Citizen Ruth," "The Passion of Martin" and "Election," Payne pushes characters to the edge and makes audiences laugh all along the way.

Payne grew up in Omaha in the Dundee neighborhood. After leaving Nebraska, he went on to earn bachelor degrees in history and literature at Stanford University.

In an interview via e-mail, Payne said his studies "were great preparation, since both deal with the human story — what people do. And that's what film is concerned with."

Payne's actual film career began at UCLA's prestigious film school, where he received a master of fine arts degree.

There, he made his thesis film, "The Passion of Martin." Immediately, he formed a reputation for subversive satire and comedy that's based on real and sometimes difficult experiences.

"The Passion of Martin" follows the title character through his roller coaster of a relationship with a new lover.

Actually, it's more like one huge hill with a short ascent and negative g's thereafter. Martin immediately falls in love, but his overwhelming jealousy sends him on a never-ending plunge. As his actions become increasingly outlandish (and even frightening at times), the film's comedy builds.

This pairing of intensity with hilarity characterizes all of Payne's films, as well as his personality.

"At times, he can be very intense, which I think is an asset," said Kathy Sheppard, a film commissioner at the Omaha Film Office.

At the same time, "he's very intelligent and fun to be around," added Dan Ladely, the director of the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater.

"The Passion of Martin" could be seen as an intense drama, but Payne uses his sense of humor and unique editing and cinematography to twist it into a stinging comedy.

The same is true for Payne's first feature film, "Citizen Ruth," which brought him notoriety in the film industry. It was screened at the Sundance Film Festival as well as more than 20 other festivals around the world. At the 1996 Munich Film Festival, "Citizen Ruth" won the High Hopes Award.

Again, critics praised Payne's directing for its presentation of dramatic subject matter as comical. But "Citizen Ruth" also gained attention because it dealt with the abortion controversy.

The main character, Ruth Stoops (Laura Dern), is addicted to huffing anything she can get her hands on. And she is pregnant. Both pro-abortion rights and anti-abortion activists latch on to her cause.

In the end, Payne refused to take sides. Critics have attacked him for his objectivity, yet others have praised it.

Ladely said this sort of criticism doesn't matter.

"One thing that's really good about art is that when it's at its best, it makes you think," he said. "Alexander creates a situation that allows the audience to use their brains."

Although Payne's films are entertaining, Payne goes beyond that realm.

"The films are highly entertaining and really fun," Ladely said.

But he also added, "I think they're very intelligently made films."

In his most recent film, "Election," Payne takes a look at student government elections from varying sides. The film stars Matthew Broderick as a high school teacher who manipulates the election, but Payne also presents the story through the eyes of the student government candidates.

With this film and "Citizen Ruth," Payne brought his art back to Nebraska. Both films were shot in Omaha, and many of the actors were local residents.

"When you grow up in Omaha, you always want to leave," Payne said. "But I found that in film school, all I wanted to do was get to the point where I could shoot in Nebraska."

Payne's work also provided a break for another Nebraskan. Chris Klein, who stars in "Election," was attending high school in Omaha when he auditioned for the role. Klein has gone on with his acting career and can be seen in "American Pie."

Payne brings his work here to create realistic settings. In doing so, he's helping to put Nebraska on the map. It's rare that a film opens in New York, Los



SHAWN DRAPAL/DN

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Angeles and Omaha, but both of his recent films have.

Payne is currently working on three scripts.

"I've become very greedy," Payne said. "Of these three scripts I'm juggling, only one of them would not involve some filming in Omaha."

His next directing project, "About Schmidt," is based on a book about a WASP attorney's rites of passage as he retires and marries his daughter to a protégé in his company. Before you start expecting a John Grisham film, keep Payne's style in mind.

"You never know how it will turn out," Sheppard said. Payne's success has made it possible

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for him to work with respected actors. It is rumored that Jack Nicholson may have the lead role in "About Schmidt."

But all of Payne's success hasn't flawed his nice guy image.

"He's still the Alexander we remember from the first phone call, the first meeting," Sheppard said. "(He's) probably one of the most considerate people I've met in the film industry."

Ladely added, "Alexander is someone whom we can be proud of as Nebraskans. He keeps coming back and shooting, and he's shooting really good films."



COURTESY PHOTO

ABOVE: Laura Dern plays the selfish, unruly, huffing Ruth whose pregnancy sets off both pro- and anti-abortion rights supporters in Alexander Payne's "Citizen Ruth." TOP OF PAGE: In Payne's "Election," Matthew Broderick stars as a civics teacher who rigs the student government election.