

# Performances fuel satirical 'Beauty'

By **EMILY PYEATT**  
Staff writer

"I rule!" says Kevin Spacey, the sexually obsessed suburban father in the intriguing "American Beauty."

Although "American Beauty" provides a well-known comment on the constraints of suburbia, the film's stylistic elements distinguish it from films such as Todd Solondz's "Happiness."

The performances of the stellar cast, the cinematography of Conrad L. Hall ("Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid"), the directing of Sam Mendes ("The Blue Room" and "Cabaret") and the themes defining true American beauty contribute to an intensely humorous and thought-provoking film.

Academy Award-winner Spacey ("The Usual Suspects") pours himself into the role of a typical suburbanite who feels as if life is not what he planned it to be. His plausible and humorous performance is sure to stir talk of awards.

Spacey's Lester Burnham states simply at the beginning of the film, "In a way, I'm already dead." Throughout the film, Lester confronts the defeat of a life lacking the excitement he desires.

Lester's sexless marriage is tainted with superficiality by Carolyn (Annette Bening), his shallow real-estate-agent wife who is absorbed in the beauty she finds in her rose garden. Carolyn desperately attempts to cultivate the perfect home and is driven to succeed.

Lester's dead-end job as a magazine reporter also troubles him. Mendes portrays the monotony of everyday work life by showing Lester surrounded by bleak fluorescent lights and cubicles.

Finally, Lester is confronted by the realization that he lacks a relationship with his daughter, Jane (Thora Birch).

## Film Review The Facts

**Title:** "American Beauty"  
**Director:** Sam Mendes  
**Rating:** R (language, nudity, drug use, violence, adult content)  
**Stars:** Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, Thora Birch  
**Grade:** B+  
**Five Words:** A must see cinematic beauty.

The troubled teen is detached from her parents and filled with insecurities. The only thing Jane and Carolyn seem to agree on is that Lester is a dork.

But when Lester is dragged to Jane's dance performance at a basketball game, he is completely transformed by the image of the teen-age vixen, Angela (Mena Suvari).

Angela is Jane's friend and the object of Lester's desires. Suvari is packed with Heather Graham-type sex appeal, which is a bit too disconcerting coming from a teen-ager. Lester fantasizes about Angela swimming in rose petals, and the fantasies provide the sexual escape needed to change his life.

Lester is then influenced by neighbor Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley). Ricky reintroduces Lester into the world of marijuana from his youth and becomes Lester's hero by quitting his catering job with no second thought. This inspires Lester to take the fate of his job into his own hands. Thus Lester's physical and emotional transformation continues.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of the film is the Fitts family, which lives next door to Lester and his family.

Chris Cooper plays Colonel Fitts, a military officer who dominates his family's "responsibility and structure" to a point that leaves his wife, Barbara



Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening play a disillusioned married couple in "American Beauty," a dark comedic film about suburban life. COURTESY PHOTO

(Allison Janney), incapable of communication. The Colonel trains his family and self for the conformity of the military and suburbia. This negatively influences Ricky, leaving him detached, just as Jane is from her parents.

Jane and Ricky's relationship provides the necessary escape needed from family constraints, but it is Ricky's character that shines.

Bentley's performance as Ricky truly intrigues and captivates. Through the "eye" of Ricky's video camera, audiences are allowed the glimpses of true beauty.

Tension throughout "Beauty" is

created as societal norms are broken and explored by all characters. Mendes' directorial power heightens this tension.

The influence of the theater is evident in Mendes' artistic style. Mendes comes from theatrical roots and makes his film debut with "American Beauty."

Hall's cinematography is stunning in its minimalist qualities. Characters are presented in realistic sets that seem to border the abstract because of the sets' simplicity. Overhead shots throughout the film reveal the sameness of suburbia. Colors are richly intense, specifically the shades of— you guessed it— red, white and blue.

"Beauty," although impressive, does present some flaws, mainly the overdone and clichéd views of suburbia.

For example, the generic, militaristic view of gays is found in the Colonel's reaction to the neighborhood's gay couple.

Yet, the flaws are few, and "American Beauty" is an admirable big-studio Hollywood blockbuster. The film attempts the extraordinary, managing to probe into modern society in a profoundly intriguing manner.

After all, as one character says in the film, there is "nothing worse in life than being ordinary."

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**Bif Naked**  
"I Bificus"  
Lava/Atlantic  
Grade: B

"I Bificus," the newest album from Bif Naked, would sound like a compilation to those who didn't know better.

Her many styles include hard-nosed punk/ska and typical '90s rock with some touching ballads mixed in.

By giving props to Madonna, Ricky Martin, Luciano Pavarotti, the Dalai Lama and Satan, as well as touring with Kid Rock and appearing in Lilith Fair this year, Bif made it obvious that her inspiration flows from diverse sources.

When she was a child in New Delhi, India, Bif was adopted by American missionaries. The family moved through North America, eventually making Winnipeg, Manitoba, their home. She started singing in punk bands with names such as Jungle Milk, Gorilla Gorilla, Chrome Dog and Dying To Be Violent, but Bif has said she felt creatively bound by the band's other

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members.

Bif learned the penalties of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, falling victim to alcohol, drugs and promiscuous sex. But unlike the sad stories VH1 tells about burnt-out rock stars, Bif vowed to change. She no longer drinks, abuses drugs or eats meat. Instead, she gives her audiences the message that true success stems from respecting your body and environment.

"Moment of Weakness," Bif's first video from "I Bificus," is rather uninteresting and doesn't make the listener wish to hear more. But stopping yourself from listening to this album would definitely be a mistake.

Bif dabbles in cliché '90s rock, but as soon as you move past those unfeeling songs, a mix of tough punk/ska and heartfelt ballads is revealed.

"Chotee" is a hard-punk storybook about her failed marriage with Jungle

Milk's drummer. Though the lyrics aren't deep, they are painfully honest.

"Any Day Now" combines real drums, electronic drum beats, keyboards and surprisingly intelligent programming into a cosmic ballad. Compared with the boring rock tracks that surround the song, "Any Day Now" stands out as a star among the black clouds.

The most remarkable track on "I Bificus" is "Lucky," a dirge that follows "Moment of Weakness." Broadway-style percussion, subtle guitars and expert engineering and mixing turn the repetitive lyrics of this tune into a masterpiece for Bif Naked.

"I Bificus" shares many different genres on one piece of plastic, some complete disappointments, others liberating in their virtuosity. Almost any lover of rock music can find a song that sticks in his or her head for days. Though the lyrics fall short of introspection, the music of this album holds its own.

—Andrew Shaw

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