

# 'Smoke' drags in the beginning, leaves unanswered questions

By Samuel McKewon  
Senior editor

"Holy Smoke!" is the rare case of a movie's ending invalidating its beginning. Often, the situation is reverse - improbable final moments attempt to cover up for the weak trick-laden script setup that preceded it.

Not so in the direction by Jane Campion, who made one great film, "The Piano," a rumination on a woman's desire in a desolate setting. In that movie it was a deaf, mousy tag-along of a wife Holly Hunter.

Here it is Ruth, played by Kate Winslet, in a brave if somewhat stilted performance. Deeply flung into an Indian cult, "Holy Smoke!" establishes itself as a story about Ruth's blind devotion to a religious belief we never know much about, and her Australian family's wishes to root her out of it.

In "The Piano" and this movie, Campion establishes herself as a master-class visualist, and the images she creates take more precedence than the dialogue; they are a logical extension of the script's feminist anthem as seen by co-writers Campion and her sister, Anna.

But that anthem holds itself in the shadows until the final hour, which is a fairly harrowing probe into the sexual wiring of men, specifically cult deprogrammer P.J. Waters (Harvey Keitel), who's hired by Ruth's mum and dad to draw Ruth out of the cult coma.

When "Holy Smoke!" shifts winds toward its main theme, and does so with a scene of deep, unexpected sexual frankness, it's startling.

To Campion's credit, that key

scene (one that Winslet said took every bit of courage for her to do) is very well done. Its planned effect takes hold, and the final hour descends into dark, steamy waters deeper and deeper, until eventually Keitel's character is stumbling around in Australian desert in red drag, hallucinating goddesses of yoga.

On the strength of the two lead performances, the rails don't come off. But the first half has some explaining to do, specifically how Ruth, who reveals herself to be a wealth of strong ideas and a manipulator, was ever reeled into a cult trap. Campion doesn't seem to have an answer, as



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she doesn't

deeply explore the parameters of Ruth faith, nor her fellow believers. Which, in a way, is disappointing. The setup is promising; Ruth, a girl we are led to believe was without the ability to feel before her religious breakthrough in India, is persuaded to come to the Australian Outback. She undergoes a three-day programming session with Waters, who normally works with an assistant but mostly works alone on Ruth.

The "halfway house" sits squarely in the middle of a vast red desert, a fine visual palette for Campion to work with.

Besides Ruth and P.J., a typical cast of eccentric Australians dot the landscape, all nearly as strange, if

not stranger, than Ruth. One in particular, a sister-in-law (Sophie Lee) confesses to P.J. she fantasizes about movie stars during sex right before demonstrating her oral abilities directly.

Somehow, the off-color humor, which includes the typical dog and dim bulbs Aussie gags in the Outback, clashes with, rather than empowers, the central idea of female enlightenment.

Consider how a movie can balance a character named Fabio, who breaks his nose running into a light pole, and a scene in which Ruth is nearly raped. In reality, the script does not balance the scenes, because they happen in the two different movies that "Holy Smoke!" is divided into.

Either one would have been fine on its own. There are fine supporting performances, and a few characters worth investing in until, in the film's second half, they exist only to serve the plot.

And when the tables finally turn, and the deprogrammer gets a taste of his own medicine, Winslet's acting suffers. She doesn't bare the dreamy vulnerability of her Ruth only two days before.

There is no here-to-there connection, nor could there be. The Campion sisters have written a tale of conversion within a conversion and however stunning the photography might be, it leaves an empty feeling, as if little had been accomplished.

It's exacerbated by a tack-on ending with the title card "one year later." Those final minutes reveal an arbitrariness in the entire production; what's the point of any revelation that leaves the characters in same place they began? Ruth was better off with wave dances and flowing white sheets in the cult. So was the movie. ★★

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## Jazz in June provides local music flavor

JAZZ form page 2

Also featured in the gallery during Jazz in June are the engravings and etchings of Leonard Baskin, and an exhibit that documents performance art.

Piper said the success of Jazz in June had exceeded the NAA's hopes of attracting a younger audience.

"As it turns out," she said, "we

developed a new audience, not just a younger one. It's any age - from tiny babies with their mothers, to students studying, to older people sitting in wheelchairs. We had no idea it would grow so big."

Although soft drinks, iced tea and cookies will be sold during the concerts, people are encouraged to bring their own food, blankets and chairs. Volunteers from the NAA

will be selling Jazz in June posters, and T-shirts. Compact discs and tapes of the night's featured band will be on sale as well.

Concerts will be Tuesdays at 7 p.m. The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery will re-open its doors at 6:30 p.m. and will be open during the concerts. In case of rain, the concerts will be held in the Sheldon Auditorium.

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