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Sundance: Back to the '80s, plus 'Big Fan' and 'Hideous Men'

Jan 20, 2009, 07:30 AM | by Owen Gleiberman
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How's this for an indie-vs.-mainstream fairy tale? In 1995, Greg Mottola, with Steven Soderbergh serving as his producer and backer, made *The Daytrippers*, a dysfunctional-family road comedy starring Hope Davis, Stanley Tucci, and Parker Posey. (Can't you just *feel* that mid-'90s nostalgia?) The movie was submitted to Sundance, but it didn't get in. So Soderbergh submitted it to Slamdance, the "alternative" Park City festival that was then in its formative years, and the movie played there in 1996, got picked up for distribution, and became the most high-profile hit that Slamdance ever spawned. But wait, it gets better. Mottola went to work in series television, directing episodes of *Undeclared* and *Arrested Development*, and then, more than 10 years later, he directed his followup film, and it was a hilariously humane and bold comedy, one that blew away *The Daytrippers* in its marvelous layered wordplay, its devious and supple naturalistic flow. It was called...*Superbad*.

Now, after having shepherded that Judd Apatow smash, Mottola, on Monday night, made a point of going back to his roots by showing up at Sundance -- no one on stage ever mentioned Slamdance -- to present his third movie, *Adventureland*, a lovely, funny, understated, and deftly authentic tale of growing up in the long-ago, far-away days of the summer of 1987. The movie stars Jesse Eisenberg, from *The Squid and the Whale*, who has sprouted into a handsome but still neurotically sincere dude who now resembles a mop-topped young Jewish version of John Lydon. He plays James, who has managed the singular feat of graduating from college without ever losing his virginity (he's saving it for true love). He spends the months before graduate school working in a scruffy amusement park, which turns out to be his real education.

I have no doubt that when you saw the words "summer of 1987," you thought: Aha! (No pun intended.) Another '80s period piece! How quaint! How Sundance! The quiet, modest beauty of *Adventureland* is that while it nails all the trappings of the late Reagan years, it doesn't rub them in your face. It captures its time gently, the way that *Dazed and Confused* did with the slow-ride '70s, and it does so by making the key period detail not the clothes or the songs but the *mood*, the personalities on screen. (That said, Mottola makes terrific use of period chestnuts like "Rock Me Amadeus" and the delicate swoon of "Don't Dream It's Over.") This was the last era before grunge, the Internet, and fatally omnipresent youth irony, and Mottola has a sixth sense for the way that kids in the '80s reached for detachment-as-attitude without quite getting there. In hindsight, their hearts weren't too far from their sleeves, and *Adventureland* is like an '80s teen comedy for grownups.

Its resonant tone aside, the movie has a fairly conventional romantic plot. At the amusement park, where he goes to work in the Games section (i.e., giving away giant stuffed pandas to stupid jocks), Eisenberg draws the attention of Kristen Stewart (from *Twilight*), who brings her captivating, slightly sulky intelligence to the role of a sweet girl who plays out her hidden troubles by sleeping with the park's older, married, token greaser rock star (Ryan Reynolds). Eisenberg also carries on a flirtation with a cherry-lipped hottie with Madonna's hair. For a geek, the guy does pretty well, but maybe that's because the movie doesn't fetishize his uptightness the way that *Nick and Nora's Infinite Playlist* did Michael Cera's. *Adventureland* runs into third-act problems -- I wish it offered more of a romantic rush at the end -- but then, the movie's real romance is with a time that seemed jaded while it was happening but that now looks like the last moment before jadedness really took over.

Usually, it takes a while for a screenwriter to get a shot at becoming a director, but Robert Siegel has wasted no time. The new-kid-on-the-block scribe who created a splash by writing *The Wrestler* has a movie at Sundance that he directed as well as wrote, and he turns out to be the real McCoy: a shrewd and confident filmmaker. *Big Fan*, starring Patton Oswalt as a 36-year-old Staten Island parking-garage attendant who has no life apart from his fervid devotion to the New York Giants, leads you to expect an over-the-top stalker comedy, but here, as in *The Wrestler*, nothing is hyperbolic or overstated. The movie is an unblinking look at the hidden (or maybe not so hidden) pathology of American sports mania, but it's also a crafty study of a specific human being.

Oswalt's Paul sits in his parking booth, then comes home each night (to the home he shares with his kvetching mother) and calls the Sports Talk radio phone-in show, so that he can spout the "spontaneous" *Go Giants! Eagles suck!* rant that he has already scrawled out on a legal pad. His buddy (Kevin Corrigan) listens in, cheering him on. Their idea of going to a game is to sit in the parking lot of Giants Stadium watching it on a TV propped up on the trunk of their car.

I took a lot of heat from readers for calling Patton Oswalt "bland" as the voice of Remy in *Ratatouille* -- I stand by the assessment -- but in *Big Fan*, looking like a mild, dwarfish Michael Moore, Oswalt does a pinpoint job of making Paul into an obsessive, childish, yet disarmingly rational spokesman for the "wholesome" addiction that our all-sports-all-the-time culture has helped spawn. After Paul spots one of his Giants heroes at a Staten Island gas station, he tails him to a strip club and approaches his table, and he ends up getting beaten up by his hero -- an event you'd expect would make him furious. Only *Big Fan*, while it keeps you hanging on right through to the suspenseful climax (which turns the tables, delightfully, on the audience), never does what you expect. That's what makes Siegel a born entertainer.

* * *

I've never read *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, the 1999 short-story collection by the late David Foster Wallace, so I can't say if the scrappy, intermittently perceptive dramatic feature that's been cobbled together out of it -- it was written and directed by John Krasinski, of *The Office* -- is faithful to Wallace's vision. At 72 minutes, it's a short but far-from-sweet series of toxic-pill relationship vignettes, broken up by interviews with the male characters, nearly all of whom prove, beneath their "enlightened" liberal-humanist facades, to be insidious, lecherous, lying, brutally self-justifying...men. (The tone of the interviews recalls Andie MacDowell's therapy sessions in *sex, lies, and videotape*, only minus the compassion.)

I'm probably making the movie sound like a sadomasochistic Neil LaBute screed, and parts of it are (at times, it should have been called *Me and You and Every One of the Bastards We Know*), but big fat chunks of the dialogue have that great David Foster Wallace quality: They're whooshing roller-coasters of words, all carrying the built-in drama of confession. The movie bashes men, all right, but it also takes you on a ride through their failures, desires, resentments, and confusions. What *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* won't quite say out loud is that it's really just as much an attack on women, who are the ones on screen judging these men and therefore look even harsher.

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COMMENTS

rockerchick81 Wed, Jan 21, 2009 at 08:40 PM EST

I can't wait to see Adventureland! I'm totally into an 80's picture. One of my favorite synth rock bands has music in it! The Programaddicts' song "City Girls" is in the film <http://adventureland.theprogramaddicts.com> I don't know where yet, but I got an email from the band saying that the song got picked up. Can't wait!

romy Wed, Jan 21, 2009 at 05:00 PM EST

i was a huge fan of The Daytrippers for years, and always wondered what Greg Mottola has been doing since then until finally seeing his name last year on Superbad. Last week I saw the preview for Adventureland in the theaters and it didn't look too promising - but after reading Owen's review (and remembering how much I loved The Daytrippers) I will definitely give it a shot. Thanks Owen. I think they're trying to market it as a teen comedy when it's something entirely different.

green Wed, Jan 21, 2009 at 02:41 AM EST

I found a great site "***** WealthyRomances com *****" It 's where you have the opportunity dreaming about dating a millionaire and make it true! I thought everyone needed to meet some miracle after all the terrible stuff in the news and the economy :)

green Tue, Jan 20, 2009 at 02:14 PM EST

<http://hollywoodinsider.ew.com/2009/01/sundance-the-in.html?cid=145648124#comment-145648124>

Jon Tue, Jan 20, 2009 at 11:28 AM EST

I absolutely love this blog. It's great getting Owen's immediate reaction to the movies he's watching. This is the best thing "EW" has had on this site in forever.
"[B]ut then, the movie's real romance is with a time that seemed jaded while it was happening but that now looks like the last moment before jadedness really took over." That is a brilliant line. And so true, too. It kind of sums up the period and our nostalgic feelings toward it.
And as a sports fan, I cannot wait to see "Big Fan." I listen to a lot of sports talk and I always wonder "Who are these people who wait three hours to talk on the air for two minutes?" I think this is a portrait of one. It sounds like the sports version of "The King of Comedy."