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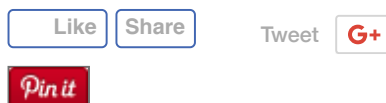


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L.I.E.

NR

By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Nov 1, 2004



Reviews

The opening shot of L.I.E. could stand as a metaphor for the whole film: teen-age boy climbs onto an overpass spanning the Long Island Expressway, and stands on one foot, tottering precariously yet somehow maintaining his balance. In the same way, a movie that often seems about to topple and go splat on the asphalt, rights itself every time like a gyroscope, opening onto unexpected vistas or taking a character where you least expected him to go. And it's precisely this one-legged balancing act that makes the first feature from Michael Cuesta so daring, improvisatory and fresh.

A sense of imminent disaster also dogs Howie Blitzler (Paul Franklin Dano), a 15-year-old who lives in the well-groomed burbs off the expressway's Exit 51. Howie is still mourning his mother, who was killed in the not-distant past in an expressway accident. (In a poignant scene, he sorts through a shoebox of her cosmetics, trying to conjure her presence by sniffing her bottle of perfume.) Dad (Bruce Altman), a macho contractor (like a white-collar Joey Buttafuoco) who amassed funny money during the '80s, seems mainly puzzled by his son's existence, and likes to wear a hardhat while doing it doggy-style with his buff girlfriend in front of the window.

Howie runs with a crowd of teenage boys who rob neighbors' houses for the sport of it. He's unaware that his good buddy Gary (Billy Kay), a pierced and tattooed pretty-boy, secretly swaps money for sex with Big John (Brian Cox), a sixty-ish ex-Marine and neighborhood pedophile. Gary persuades Howie to help him steal Big John's weapons from his basement, fences one of the guns and lights out for California (after promising Howie they'd escape Long Island together.) He also abandons Howie to the wrath of Big John-and his offer of immunity in exchange for sexual favors. Howie declines. But when his father is hauled off to the federal pen for embezzlement, Howie turns

for solace to Big John, a parental figure who initially seems as benign as Riding Hood's grandma.

We could have had a cliché here: coming-of-ager about sensitive, neglected teen; the sexual predator as chicken hawk, on the loose in the leafy burbs; the misery and mayhem lurking at the end of all those pristine driveways. But the film is rescued by the singularity and grittiness of an auteur's vision: This is a from-the-gut recreation of the tortured, geeky period of adolescence, which anyone who grew up in suburban America will recognize. (It rings truer than the slick, over-hyped *American Beauty*, which seemed more manufactured 'concept' than felt experience.). And we root for Howie as he reels under a succession of blows almost too much for one kid to bear. Director Michael Cuesta and Paul Franklin Dano have crafted a luminous local hero who draws on deep reserves of resilience and takes form right before our eyes.

In another inspired casting choice, Marcia DeBonis plays a blousy, Bohemian-looking guidance counselor, well-intentioned but helpless to guide Howie. Brian Cox brings multi-shadings to the role of Big John, something of a family man when not cruising the exits for lanky boys. His scenes with the vulnerable Howie turn surprising loop-de-loops, paternal tenderness vying with baser impulses. A gay pedophile as mensch? Well, yeah. And in Howie's friendship with Gary, the film also delicately speculates on Howie's sexual orientation, without trying to resolve it. (None of this, however, could justify the NC-17 rating unfairly slapped on a film that's far more restrained than, say, *Boogie Nights*.)

The subtle score avoids cueing viewers with the usual teen surround sound, opting instead for a kind of muted, grinding synthesizer. And Cuesta's camera deftly captures middle-class sprawl beyond the exit signs, with desolate, angular images of buildings and sky in a stark white and blue palette; shots of Howie's antiseptically bright house, which could be some eternal model home floating over the rot within, and the sinister, somehow dirty gold and brown of Big John's ranch house, complete with shag rug. And the camera's always drawn back to the expressway, with its ever-audible hum, sometimes shot in fast-motion as a network of pulsing streaks, an arterial hell. Here's a low-budget, deceptively minimalist drama that delivers big.

--Erica Abeel

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