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Mendes' new comedy explores meaning of marriage in America

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jun. 23, 2009

Maya Rudolph, right, and John Krasinski in a scene from "Away We Go" (AP/Focus Features)

Sam Mendes, the British master of existential cinematic tragedy, American style (?American Beauty,? ?Revolutionary Road?), opened his new film this past weekend. John Krasinski (?The Office?) as Burt Farlander and Maya Rudolph (?Prairie Home Companion?) as the lovely African-American Verona De Tessant are an unmarried couple expecting a baby. They move near Burt?s folks (Catherine O?Hara and Jeff Daniels) for the sake of the baby. But when the folks up and follow their dream of living in Belgium, Burt and Verona hit the road, checking out the places where relatives, former colleagues and college friends are, to see where they want to put down roots.

Away We Go is supposed to be a comedy. It didn?t seem all that funny, but is more post-20th-century, middle-class, post-ecclesial (or synagogue or mosque), trying to find identity and place in a land and culture gone random. More than saying anything predictive of what marriage and family might look like as we continue into the 21st century, it is a search for something stable, a still point in the turning world for two people who seem like aliens in their own country. Any sign of Christianity or religion, however, is what is reflected in the good hearts of Burt and Verona.

The beautiful thing about the film is benevolence and the desire for children -- for the most part. Mendes and writers Dave Eggers and Vendela Vida use extreme juxtaposition of characters to show what Burt and Verona *don?t want* for their family. Verona?s loud and crass former boss, Lily (Allison Janney), for example, is so terribly inappropriate that it seems to stem from either loneliness or being on the verge of a nervous breakdown. One can only pity her and her family, with their pointless, fragile unity.

The film attempts some commentary on the social-political milieu into which the couple is bringing a child, but this is not the main theme.

The next stop for Burt and Verona is a visit to their married college friends Munch (Melanie Lynskey) and Tom (Chris Messina) in Montreal. They have adopted several children, and in a heart-rending scene in one of Montreal?s adult bars, Munch does a slow, solitary dance filled with loss and pathos. Tom and Burt look on and Tom explains that Munch lost their fifth baby through miscarriage a few days before. ?I don?t know what to do anymore. Do you name them? Do you bury them??

Here Mendes captures the intimacy of a thousand hushed conversations in the gaze between husband and wife. Munch and Tom?s losses have not diminished their love for one another, but strengthened it through tears, empathy and desire for one another?s good. You can see it in their eyes.

Burt and Verona rush to their next stop, Florida. Courtney (Paul Schneider) is Burt?s brother and his wife has just walked out on him and their daughter. Unable to console Courtney, Burt finds Verona in the backyard where they exchange a rambling version of vows because Verona refuses traditional marriage at all costs.

This road trip ends happily enough when Verona leads Burt to her family?s home where no one lives anymore. Now they are home. Burt?s last name ?Farlander? captures the existential nature of ?Away We Go? well. They may always be aliens in a far land.

?Away We Go? is a thoughtful attempt to refine a meaning of marriage and family, to locate it, plant it and root it. It is about reconnecting with one?s place in the world, that piece of earth that nourished us as we grew -- even if we grew up a bit wild, untended and unpolished. The absence of anything explicitly religious in the film is more than enough commentary on contemporary marriage and family in America. These two are doing it on their own, not out of disregard, but because it doesn?t seem to even occur to them.

The questions the film evokes from me are: Does religious faith have any relevance for mainstream American marriage and family today? Is it really this gone? Is human love enough? And finally, has Mendes captured an authentic vision of American life today? Is there hope? Are we ever really home? Perhaps.

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