

DVD Review: Kat Dennings Shines in Flawed 'Daydream Nation'

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on May 19, 2011 - 12:15pm

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CHICAGO – Michael Goldbach's little-seen quirk-fest is a feature filmmaking debut like many others. It feels less like a final draft than an overcrowded sketchpad. There seems to be no end to the amount of intriguing ideas that Goldbach wishes to tackle, but he has little idea of how to string them together. His various stylistic conceits distract from the narrative rather than enhance it, resulting in an ungainly picture.

Luckily, "Daydream Nation" is blessed with two young leads so appealing and authentic that they make viewers forget the film's sizable flaws for long passages of its running time. Kat Dennings has spent the last few years being tossed from one so-so vehicle to another, but she always emerges unscathed, thanks to her self-deprecating charm and unshakable charisma. She deserves to be a star in the same league as Emma Stone, as does her co-star Reece Thompson, still best known for his work opposite Anna Kendrick in "Rocket Science."



DVD Rating: **2.5/5.0**

It's a shame that these well-matched stars weren't given better material to work with. In the film's opening moments, Goldbach throws as assortment of supposedly disturbing images at the audience, including a jarringly artificial industrial fire that may (or may not) be signaling the end of the world. The script's obvious selling point is its formulaic fusion of elements from iconic indies "Donnie Darko" and "Juno." Caroline (Dennings), the film's exceptionally confident, pop culture-savvy heroine, never once speaks like a halfway-plausible teenager. Goldbach's dialogue sure has mastered the self-conscious cleverness of Diablo Cody, but it lacks her sharp wit and unbridled originality. When Caroline observes, "There's more incest in this town than an Atom Egoyan film," it's hard not to stifle an instant groan.

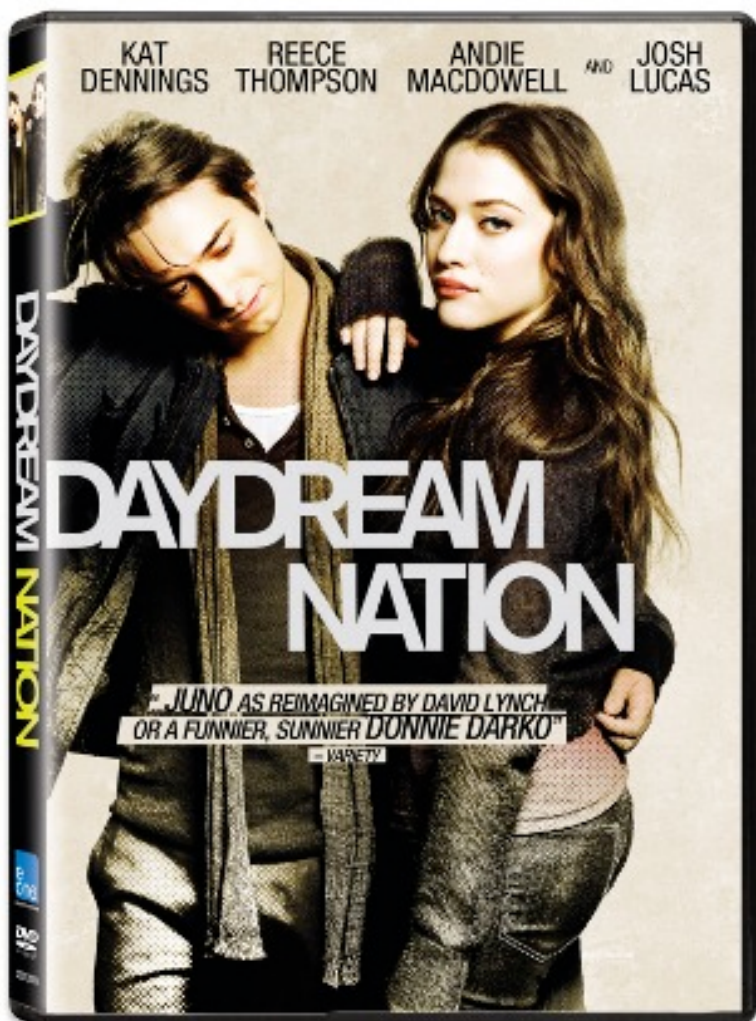
Yet Dennings proves to be a pro with this sort of overwritten banter. She nails her character's city girl cynicism while entrapped in a (literally) toxic suburb. The only local man that sparks Caroline's interest is her handsome young teacher, Mr. A., played by the effortlessly creepy Josh Lucas. I love the playful, almost campy way in which Caroline declares, "I'd like to be tutored!" Soon, the horny teen finds herself caught in an ill-advised triangle when she entertains the clumsy desires of sensitive pothead Thurston (Thompson). Her deadpan demeanor during their initial date results in most of the film's biggest laughs, leading to a sex scene that expertly captures the awkwardness of a first time.



Kat Dennings and Josh Lucas star in Michael Goldbach's *Daydream Nation*.

Photo credit: Anchor Bay Entertainment

If Goldbach had fully believed in the integrity of his characters, he may have not felt compelled to clutter the screen with so many half-formed concepts. One sequence visualizes a derivative script written by Mr. A., which stitches together images from classics such as "The Graduate" and "Taxi Driver." It's an amusing scene, but not all that far off from the actual film, which at times plays like a well-worn list of Sundance-approved clichés. There are several self-contained vignettes (preceded by showy title cards) that fail to pay off. This film might also break a record for its extravagant number of insert shots closing in on a finger ringing a doorbell. Goldbach seems driven to expose the dark side of suburbia, but he simply has nothing new to say. Even the picture's best scenes carry a stale whiff of familiarity. In a monologue seemingly designed for applause, Caroline dresses down a self-righteous student, Jenny (Katie Boland), dissecting her hypocrisies with coldly intellectual precision. Her words later inspire Jenny to break out of her sheltered existence and make her first stab at being bad. We've seen this archetype countless times before, but Boland brings a vulnerability to the role that is quite touching, not to mention funny.



Daydream Nation was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on May 17, 2011.

Photo credit: Anchor Bay Entertainment

It's a mere coincidence that "Nation" was released to stores on the same day as Christophe Honoré's romantic drama, "The Beautiful Person," which is also about a girl torn between the desires of a lovestruck student and an obsessive teacher. Whereas Goldbach bends over backwards to be shocking and distinctive, Honoré's film manages to be more unsettling simply by taking a subtle, grounded approach to the material. It's the difference between an amateur and a master. What's most striking about both films is the way in which they end. Without giving anything away, allow me to say that Honoré takes an unsentimental approach, resulting in an ending that is cathartic in its honesty. In contrast, the final act of "Nation" is a cop-out on every level, settling for saccharine morals with a resignation that's flat-out depressing.

"Daydream Nation" is presented in its 1.78:1 aspect ratio, and includes a brief making-of featurette. Goldbach says the idea for the film first came to him during his mid-twenties when he visited his hometown and discovered people his age teaching high school students. It was his goal to capture the time in every teenager's life when they're most prone to doing "stupid, dangerous things." Dennings discusses how her character "plays a role" for Mr. A., while Lucas argues that his character is essentially harmless—just very, very self-involved. Thompson reflects on the fact that he's spent the majority of his young career working with first-time filmmakers. No offense to first-timers, but I think it's about time that an assured, experienced auteur gave Thompson the showcase he deserves.

'Daydream Nation' is released by Anchor Bay Entertainment and stars Kat Dennings, Reece Thompson, Josh Lucas, Andie MacDowell, Rachel Blanchard, Natasha Calis, Quinn Lord, Calum Worthy and Katie Boland. It was written and directed by Michael Goldbach. It was released on May 17, 2011. It is rated R.



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