

Blu-Ray Review: Overlooked ‘Ceremony’ Deserves to Be Celebrated

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on June 30, 2011 - 9:31am

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CHICAGO – How can the directorial debut of the Fonz’s son slip by unnoticed during its initial theatrical run? Max Winkler was only 25 when he shot “Ceremony,” a film dismissed by many critics as a mere imitation of Wes Anderson’s “Rushmore.” To be fair, Winkler looks remarkably like the iconic filmmaker, and his premise does bear certain similarities to Anderson’s widely celebrated 1998 comedy.

Yet the people Winkler has created within the pages of his richly textured script feel more tangibly human than Anderson’s colorfully heightened characters ever have. Instead of glorying in the manufactured personas of its insecure protagonists, the film probes under the surface of their self-deception, exposing the vulnerability beneath the façade. Stylistically, it’s entirely different from Anderson’s work, and Winkler has mentioned in interviews that he’s still developing his voice. But “Ceremony” is anything but a scrappy work in progress.



Blu-Ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

Michael Angarano and Reece Thompson are two of the most appealing actors of their generation, though few filmmakers have previously afforded them as worthy a showcase. They play Sam and Marshall (respectively), two twenty-something friends whose once-close relationship has faded over the years. On the heels of his failed and blatantly autobiographical children’s novel, Sam orchestrates a trip that he claims is designed to help him and Marshall reconnect. Yet it becomes quickly obvious that Sam is withholding his true intentions, as he stealthily eyes his desired destination: an upscale gathering attended by his thirty-something ex, Zoe (Uma Thurman), and her sleek fiancé, Whit (played by Lee Pace with a dash of Russell Brand). Angarano is very funny in these early scenes, overplaying his suave posturing with an excess of self-confidence, while the unassuming Thompson repeatedly sabotages the charade with his painful honesty. Their chemistry manages to be both amusing and touching, even as Sam repeatedly coerces Marshall with his compulsive stream of lies. “We’re not sneaking around, we’re being mysterious,” Sam insists to his perplexed friend as they prepare to crash the private party. Though Zoe is considerably older than Sam, he remains convinced that she would favor him over Whit, a narcissistic celebrity and self-professed realist with enticing financial stability.



Michael Angarano and Reece Thompson are wonderful in Max Winkler’s Ceremony.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

It's entirely to the credit of Winkler's script that none of these people are reduced to the level of condescending caricatures. One can easily see why Zoe would've been attracted to Sam, since she still has a tendency to be as immature and childlike as he is. Whit may be a hack, but at least he's self-aware, and certainly has no intention of being vindictive to someone as visibly unthreatening as Sam. Even Zoe's screw-up brother, Teddy (Jake Johnson), proves to be more interesting than he initially seems. His disarmingly casual demeanor thinly masks a troubled mind skirting on the edge of self-destruction, and there's a riveting moment when Zoe's sorrow for her sibling turns into exasperated rage. It's clear that her tireless caregiving has caused her to seek reliable care in the arms of another. This is Thurman's best non-Tarantino vehicle since Mira Nair's 2002 TV movie, "Hysterical Blindness," and she shares scenes with Angarano that are both endearing and utterly heartbreaking. Though the film supplies many laughs, it also offers a great deal of insight and bittersweet catharsis as its characters make the difficult journey toward self-acceptance and adulthood. "Ceremony" is a splendid surprise, solidifying Winkler's reputation as a filmmaker of great promise.



Ceremony was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on June 21, 2011.

Photo credit: Magnolia Home Entertainment

The film is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio) and includes a fine array of extras. In the standard HD Net featurette, Winkler reveals that it was his intention to write a "coming-of-age tale in reverse" where a boy learns to accept that he is still a boy. Since Angarano and Winkler are a mere four years apart in age, they easily bonded on the set, discussing their own personal relationships (a commentary track from them would've been most welcome). A 21-minute making-of doc expands on the writer-director's vision for his characters, who are all somewhat "stunted, maturity-wise." He says that Sam pictures himself as the lead in a Cary Grant movie, while everyone else sees right through his false bravado. Thurman said she was aiming for a "subtle characterization" of her "temporal" role, while Pace fully embraced the chance to play a man as grounded as he is larger-than-life. There's also an 8-minute portrait of Winkler on the set of his first feature, sporting some of the same neuroses that makes his characters so endearing. Like many great directors, Winkler dreads pre-production, though he admits that the "hardest thing about directing is getting out of the van." One of the first scenes to be shot was set at an outdoor pool where Sam and Marshall were to lounge in the sun before embarking on their adventures. The chilly temperatures didn't cooperate, resulting in two shivering, shirtless stars straining to look relaxed, but the unexpected weather ended up only increasing the comedy of the scene, playing into Sam's helplessness in contriving a sense of fun.

Rounding out the extras are two brief deleted scenes, including an awkward exchange between Marshall and the sad maid of his dreams, and an extended version of Teddy's excruciating dinner monologue that further unearths the animosity he feels toward Whit. There's also an all-too-brief outtake reel in which Winkler is heard feeding dialogue to his actors as they ride in a car. Any viewer who's never been on a film set may appreciate the 7-minute featurette that captures the complex process of covering all the angles on a small yet crucial scene. And Pace is clearly having a blast in his faux African documentary, "A Year in a Tent," where Whit appears to be no less delusional than Aldous Snow, though this clip is nowhere near as laughably offensive as the tune, "African Child" in "Get Him to the Greek."

'Ceremony' is released by Magnolia Home Entertainment and stars Michael Angarano, Reece Thompson, Uma Thurman, Lee Pace and Jake Johnson. It was written and directed by Max Winkler. It was released on June 21, 2011. It is rated R.



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