

Josh Radnor's 'Liberal Arts' Takes Uncommonly Thoughtful Look at Growing Up

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Josh Radnor may be one of the most good natured humanists in modern American film. His perspective contrasts sharply with that of comedic auteurs intent on depicting a cynical view of the modern world clouded with nostalgia. Radnor may not yet be up to par with the filmmakers that have inspired him, namely Woody Allen, but his sophomore directorial effort, “Liberal Arts,” is practically bursting with promise.

Unlike Radnor's first film, the annoyingly titled, “Happythankyoumoreplease,” “Liberal Arts” is neither laugh-out-loud funny nor preciously contrived. For its first third, the film is so low-key that some might deem it rather benign. Much of the witty banter falls flat and Radnor himself lacks much screen presence or comic charisma. But at around the half-hour mark, the film starts to come to life at the precise moment that Radnor's character, a jaded 35-year-old New Yorker, gets swept up in the sort of infectious exhilaration that can only be found on a college campus.

It's fitting that “Liberal Arts” would open in Chicago on the same day as Todd Louiso's “Hello I Must Be Going,” another fine comedic drama centering on the romance between a newly single 35-year-old and an uncommonly wise 19-year-old. While Louiso's film unfolds as one would expect, Radnor refreshingly subverts the formula in a way that is no less thoughtful or nuanced. Radnor plays Jesse, an unhappily grown man whose visit to his old alma mater, Kenyon College, resurrects his youthful excitement. He's there to celebrate the retirement of his beloved professor, Peter (Richard Jenkins), who finds it unexpectedly difficult to let go of the position he'd held on to for so many years. Suddenly, a ray of the sunshine in the form of a quick-witted sophomore, Zibby (Elizabeth Olsen), brightens Jesse's world. Zibby has grown impatient with the guys her age and takes an instant liking to the handsome yet sensitive bachelor. Since both would-be lovers consider themselves old-fashioned, they continue their correspondence via mail—not e-mail, but actual written letters. And it's here where Radnor's film began to work its magic on me. There's a wonderful sequence in which the two friends connect over classical music, as Jesse suddenly finds his perception of the world altered and enhanced by the melodic genius of Mozart and Vivaldi. The scene also serves as a poignant metaphor for the impact that an exceptionally good college course can have on the mind and spirit—it can reawaken one's awe of existence.



Elizabeth Olsen and Josh Radnor star in Radnor's *Liberal Arts*.

Photo credit: Kevin Moss. An IFC Films Release.

Zibby teaches Jesse the rule of “saying yes,” which has proven to be a vital principle in both improv and life itself. By saying yes, Jesse allows himself to entertain the possibility of a romantic coupling that his mind would’ve previously deemed unthinkable. The philosophy of so many modern comedies is to embrace life’s possibilities and learn to live with the consequences. For a while, it seems like “*Liberal Arts*” is headed in that direction, and there’s a genuinely funny moment when Jesse scribbles down some simple math equations in order to make himself feel better about the age difference. Yet Radnor’s film presents a vital counterpoint to much of Hollywood’s escapist fare by refusing to dismiss the consequences of its characters actions. Whereas many of Allen’s films argue that fantasy has an edge over reality because it lacks disappointment, Radnor reminds audiences that there are great rewards to be reaped from living life with one’s eyes wide open. Sometimes “no” is just as important and brave a decision as saying “yes,” and there comes a time when Jesse feels that he must say it.

The best scenes in the film center on the relationship between Radnor and Olsen, who has proven in the course of a few pictures to be one of the most dazzling young stars in Hollywood. Liberated from the voyeuristic gaze and sexualized paranoia of “*Silent House*” and “*Martha Marcy May Marlene*,” Olsen demonstrates an impeccable comic flair and a deliriously seductive intellect without shying away from her character’s vulnerability and naïveté. It’s a tour-de-force performance that proves she’s capable of tackling any major role that producers can hurl her way. Yet the reality that her scenes with Radnor create are so convincing that many of the other subplots pale in comparison. Allison Janney is fitfully amusing as a caustic professor wallowing in the misery of life’s injustices, yet she seems more like a cartoonish caricature transferred in from Terry Zwigoff’s “*Art School Confidential*.” Even more bizarre is Zac Efron as an all-knowing stoner whose dialogue and mannerisms are so inexplicable that they defy all boundaries of credibility. And then there’s Elizabeth Reaser, a lovely and oft-underutilized actress, whose role exists solely to cement the story’s overarching moral, which Radnor lays on so thick in the final scene that it begins to feel forced.



Josh Radnor and Elizabeth Olsen star in Radnor's Liberal Arts.
Photo credit: Kevin Moss. An IFC Films Release.

These missteps wouldn't have stuck out as much if the rest of the picture weren't so stellar. Perhaps the most impressive thing about the film is Radnor's script, which includes some of the most provocative and truthful dialogue in recent memory. There's a wonderful conversation between Jesse and a troubled student named Dean (John Magaro), whose depression has alienated him from his peers. Dean ends up spending much of his time reading the work of David Foster Wallace, but as his life threatens to spiral out of control, Jesse suggests that the young man avoid authors whose lives ended in suicide. Taking a cue from his old teacher, Jesse ends up recommending a book that he personally hates, a vampire novel that may be terrible literature yet is capable of providing escapism for those in desperate need of it. One of the truths Jesse ends up relearning over the course of his extended visit is that exploring different ideas and viewpoints is crucial to one's growth as a person. As a film, I find "Liberal Arts" perfectly likable. As a rejuvenating wake-up call for our modern divisive culture, I flat-out love it.

'Liberal Arts' stars Josh Radnor, Elizabeth Olsen, Richard Jenkins, John Magaro, Allison Janney, Elizabeth Reaser and Zac Efron. It was written and directed by Josh Radnor. It was released September 21st at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.



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