

Beguiling Ensemble Nearly Salvages Frustrating 'Nobody Walks'

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – From the very beginning of her screen career, Olivia Thirlby has specialized in playing youthful seductresses intent on jump-starting their male partners' sexual coming-of-age. She exuded megawatt allure in everything from David Gordon Green's "George Washington" to Brett Ratner's memorable segment in "New York, I Love You."

Yet she received her best role to date in Jonathan Levine's overlooked 2008 romance, "The Wackness," in which she played a teen who agrees to go steady with a pot-dealing virgin, but ends up being repelled by his post-coital affections. To her, sex is just sex, though the intimacy she freely grants proves to have enormous repercussions on the mind, heart and nether regions of her inexperienced lover. It's this character who shares the most striking similarities with Martine, Thirlby's anti-heroine in director Ry Russo-Young's diverting yet problematic new film.

Like William Holden in "Picnic," Martine is an outsider who brings about change wherever she goes. She has that strange sort of appeal that turns strangers into sexual animals, as is demonstrated in the film's immensely awkward (and rather far-fetched) opening sequence set in an airport parking lot. The guy in this scene is emblematic of all the men in Russo-Young's picture, who seem content in thinking primarily with their genitals. They're an unlikable lot, but certainly not unwatchable. As Peter, the genial husband who falls under Martine's spell, John Krasinski does a fine job of conveying his character's mounting anxiety as the 23-year-old filmmaker proves harder and harder to resist, particularly when she starts nuzzling on his ear. Martine plans to have her abstract film projected at galleries in her hometown of New York City (which also serves as Russo-Young's home base), but first must complete the film's sound design with Peter's assistance at his Los Angeles home. Cinematographer Chris Blauvelt ("Meek's Cutoff") views LA through the eyes of someone experiencing the city for the first time, heightening its beauty without pushing it into the realm of surrealism. There's a wonderful sequence that illustrates the eroticism of sound itself, as Martine and Peter record various noises from sources that are viewed in extreme close-ups. Martine feigns innocence whenever she's accused of being manipulative, yet it's clear that she needs to forge a close relationship with Peter in order to get her project finished. Perhaps that's why her other male admirers are of so little interest.



John Krasinski and Olivia Thirlby star in Ry Russo-Young's *Nobody Walks*.

Photo credit: Nicholas Trikonis/Magnolia Pictures

The only character in “*Nobody Walks*” who proves to be wholly sympathetic is Peter’s wife, a no-nonsense therapist named Julie, played by the ever-invaluable Rosemarie DeWitt. She instantly senses Peter’s crush on their houseguest, and calls him out on it while boldly admitting that’s she’s attracted to her as well. All she asks is that her husband doesn’t embarrass her. Just as Peter pursues an ill-fated fling with Martine, Julie is targeted by her slick sleaze of a patient (Justin Kirk), who takes delight in unspooling his sexual fantasies, all of which involve her. There are hints that Julie is turned on by his words, especially since her sex life has been stagnant long before Martine’s arrival.

In a scene of refreshing honesty, Julie confesses to her teenage daughter, Kolt (India Ennenga of HBO’s “*Treme*”), that the person you choose to spend the rest of your life with isn’t necessarily fated. “When you’re ready, you pick one,” she replies. This serves as crushing news for Kolt, who is fervently infatuated with David (Rhys Wakefield), a hopelessly unattainable man in his early 20s. When her dreams prove to be far outside her reach, she entertains the feelings of a smitten peer, Avi (Sam Lerner), whose thick glasses and painfully sensitive demeanor make him a less desirable but safely available candidate for her affections. Does Julie’s patient represent some sort of forgotten ideal that had faded from her memory once she settled for marrying Peter? It’s a credit to the script co-authored by Russo-Young and “*Girls*” creator Lena Dunham that none of these character motivations are gratuitously underlined or pushed into the realm of heavy-handed melodrama.

Unfortunately, the film does suffer from underdeveloped characterizations that end up feeling two-dimensional, which is a flaw that I’ve never witnessed in either of the screenwriters’ previous work. The most problematic material involves the character of Kolt, particularly in the final act when Russo-Young attempts to draw contrived parallels between her and Martine. Kolt’s relationship with a predatory tutor (Emanuele Secci) feels especially artificial, and builds to a dramatic climax that rings entirely false. The poem that Kolt reads to deter the advances of yet another lustful man-child is more pretentious than provocative, though her teacher weirdly compares the girl’s work to that of Sylvia Plath. That being said, Ennenga’s performance is so exceptionally convincing that it nearly salvages the flawed material.



India Ennenga stars in Ry Russo-Young's Nobody Walks.

Photo credit: Nicholas Trikonis/Magnolia Pictures

What's conspicuously lacking from much of this film is the trademark wit that audiences have come to expect from Dunham, whose first season of the brilliant HBO series "Girls" (coupled with her superb 2010 breakout feature, "Tiny Furniture") provided viewers with one of the funniest and most insightful portraits of twentysomething life in recent memory. Russo-Young also explored the psyche of an uncommonly complex female protagonist (played by Stella Schnabel, daughter of Julian) in her previous feature, 2009's mesmerizing "You Won't Miss Me." It's clear that these enormously talented collaborators set out to create a drama populated by characters who didn't fit the studio-approved definition of "likable," while centering on a young woman who isn't above mixing work with sex, but still considers her relationship strictly professional.

At a BAMcinemaFest Q&A, Dunham said that audiences may have reacted to Martine's character differently if she had been played by a man. Perhaps that's true in some cases, but as for myself, I found Martine no more (or less) reprehensible than the men who constantly surrounded her like a pack of starving wolves. She's not a "bad person," just a confused young woman who makes infuriatingly bad decisions. Like all of the characters in "Nobody Walks," she resonates as more of a symbolic archetype in one of Kolt's poems than a fully realized human being. As well-made as the film is, it leaves the audience in a state of frustrated indifference.

'Nobody Walks' stars Olivia Thirlby, John Krasinski, Rosemarie DeWitt, India Ennenga, Justin Kirk, Rhys Wakefield, Sam Lerner, Emanuele Secci and Dylan McDermott. It was written by Lena Dunham and Ry Russo-Young and directed by Ry Russo-Young. It was released November 9th at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.



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