‘Happy Christmas’ is Au Naturale for Good or for Bland

Submitted by NickHC [1] on July 28, 2014 - 5:38pm

- Anna Kendrick [2]
- Drinking Buddies [3]
- Film Reviews [4]
- Happy Christmas [5]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [6]
- Joe Swanberg [7]
- Lena Dunham [8]
- Mark Webber [9]
- Melanie Lynskey [10]
- Nick Allen [11]



Rating: **2.5**/**5.0**

CHICAGO – One thing that struck me about writer/director Joe Swanberg’s previous “Drinking Buddies,” and made it one of my more celebrated from 2013 despite not really loving it as a film, was its importance to those good ol’ independent movies. Here were big flashy stars like Olivia Wilde and Anna Kendrick, not just acting in a movie of a lower budget, but creating a wider appeal out of a previously very niche aspect, without the film form itself changing much.

As much as it may have been marketed as a hipper romantic comedy, the movie had the naturalism of the same types of films that are made with a five-person crew, and are only shown in urban art houses for a week. The only thing really different about “Drinking Buddies” was that it featured Olivia Wilde playing the role usually reserved for the director’s friend’s girlfriend’s friend’s father’s cousin’s sister’s brother’s roommate.

Joe Swanberg’s latest release of the same star wattage (though not his direct followup to “Drinking Buddies,” as there have been 401 films in between these two) is “Happy Christmas,” an even lower-fi story than “Drinking Buddies,” steered even more by the casting that it was able to assemble. However, with this movie Swanberg doesn’t so much worry about having to make a story that could be confused with a more mainstream romantic comedy if it were to have a bigger budget.

“Happy Christmas” follows a subtle narrative that may seem like a very real piece of domestic drama to anyone. Jenny (Anna Kendrick) crashes at the home of her brother (Swanberg), his wife Kelly (Melanie Lynskey), and their son Jude (Jude Swanberg). She’s just gone through a bad breakup, and is attempting to pull herself together. She spends time with her friend Carson (Lena Dunham), and catches the eye of a guy named Kevin (Mark Webber).

Jenny creates tension with her hosts after her irresponsible behavior puts their house at risk. Meanwhile, Kelly seeks to liberate herself from the constant pressures of taking care of her son by working on a new novel.



Anna Kendrick, Lena Dunham and Jude Swanberg in ‘Happy Christmas’
Photo credit: Magnolia

This is pure home-brewed filmmaking, where it stars Swanberg, his baby son Jude, probably his Swanberg house, and maybe even the Swanberg laptop that he uses to edit films like “Happy Christmas” on. There is all definitely an intriguing factor, then, in seeing numerous actresses like Kendrick, Lynskey, and Dunham within this small movie. It’s working indeed, his endeavor to strip down film storytelling to its au naturale.

Swanberg’s latest uses numerous extended sequences for regular non-movie star activity (whether relying on phone GPS to find a Chicago apartment, flirting awkwardly in said Chicago apartment, or just sitting on one’s bed, this movie has our life within it). The large issue is that there isn’t much else there outside of these presentations themselves, with Swanberg capturing and presenting mundane actions as if to represent them with his new power of movie stars. “Happy Christmas” is little more than what its sentence-long plot means, a story of a woman putting her life together while staying with her brother, and then she begins to bond with her sister-in-law.



Joe Swanberg & Melanie Lynskey in ‘Happy Christmas’
Photo credit: Magnolia

Outside of its existence as movie production anomaly, one has to find the spots within “Happy Christmas” that push it towards making it worthwhile. Lynskey’s performance is the most directly satisfying factor, playing a supporting character with more to intrigue than Kendrick’s lead, or even Swanberg’s filmmaking. As Kelly, she presents a stress of parenting without explosive catharsis, instead she harbors internal fatigue that has left her feeling a bit trapped. Lynskey plays with finite nervousness the bashful side of a person who takes her role as mother and wife very humbly, especially in the movie’s top scene and emblematically kind-of-interesting moment where she uncomfortably deflects compliments from much looser characters played by Dunham and Kendrick.

Aside from that, there a few special moments to be found in the wistfully formal “Happy Christmas,” an albeit different step forward for low-budget storytelling. Its usage of Kodak film stock provides a grainy home movies feel that makes for some funky lighting, and nonetheless a curious departure from his digital filmmaking. There’s certainly a handful of nice honest touches within this film from the nonfictional characters borne from linear personalities. But “Happy Christmas” gets a little greedy with its simplification, until there is hardly a story there, with events and beings playing out as naturally as possible for good or for bland.

“Happy Christmas” continues its limited release in Chicago on July 25th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Anna Kendrick, Melanie Lynskey, Lena Dunham, Joe Swanberg, Mark Webber, and Jude Swanberg. Written and directed by Joe Swanberg. Rated “R”


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