

entertainment

So good it should be better

Film shows considerable courage, but misses the mark on a few points

Philip Kaufman's *Henry & June* is such an intelligent, well-crafted film that to be at all critical seems like perverse, self-indulgent nit-picking. But the fact that it is so very good makes one wish for that extra push to propel both feet to land firmly on the mark. I suspect

that Kaufman has struck his own compromise between a film so literary that only folks with enlarged brain pans would attend, and a film so avant garde (in relation to our cultural main-stream) that it would land a XXX and only be seen by lonely old men in raincoats who watch with newspapers rattling noisily on their laps. Or both. But not the public-at-large. Well, Kaufman has attracted the public-at-large, and his fusion is sublime; but his compromise is more than a touch misleading. Therefore... my quibbles.

The title is misleading, to begin with, but that leads to more. *Henry & June* has little to do, really, with Henry and June Miller, as Henry, and then June, would venture into Paris where he could seriously pursue his literary career as the writer who would push the boundaries of sexual taboos in literature like no other in the 20th century. *Henry & June* is actually about Anaïs Nin, the much more significant writer whose diaries and writings were the source for this film. Nin was to meet and have substantial intellectual, emotional and sexual encounters with both husband and wife while she was also married to her

husband, Hugo. Both the title and the film suggest Henry and June Miller as major catalysts on Nin's road to self-discovery, breaking out of her shell. But Nin was already well down the road she would take with her writing and her life. Nor was her quest so egocentric as the film suggests by omission.

This shift in the film's focus might seem subtle, but is my major quibble: Are we going to see a woman who takes action, or a woman who is merely acted upon? I already have my own well-developed alarm system which goes off whenever a work by a woman, largely about women, is finally transformed into a film by a male director. You might see this as my own reverse sexism, but I do not doubt that men can understand what a woman is about. What I do doubt, most thoroughly, is that a man can follow through with the expression. Anaïs Nin spent the large part of her literary career attempting to develop a non-masculine approach to literature. She was troubled by a masculine world-view which she saw as too intellectual, too abstract, and too prone to fragment human emotion and experience. In the larger context, beyond literature, Nin saw that masculine view destroying the individual itself, cutting it off from the real world, real needs, and setting it off on a self-destructive, world-destructive course.

Nin's alternative entailed a two-fold task. First a woman must remove the false self-perceptions imposed by a male-defined society. Second, and more difficult, she must find her own voice. Nin felt that a woman's emotion-based ability to view the world would lead to new understandings, new strengths. Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell, both good, long-time friends of Nin, would criticize her for not being

a "realistic" writer, for being too "poetic." In the film those words come, incorrectly, from June after she has read Nin's portrayal of her. Nin's counter, outside of the film, was that male "realism" was more intellectual than real, too divorced from the primal forces at play in the world. Nin's alternative reality has something to do with the poetry, power and mysticism of an emotion cleared of social debris.

Kaufman shows Nin attracted to Henry's masculinity and to his lust-for-life, while she is also attracted to June's ability to do the most horrible things stupendously and with a sense of innocence. Watching this film, the viewer might find Nin a touch neurotic as she picks up June's talk of innocence to repeat, at odd sexual moments, comments about feeling innocent, discovering innocence. In reality, Nin's search was much more complex than anything that either Henry or June could provide. She was searching for a pure experience, propelled by pure emotion and cleansed of any intellectual or emotional abstractions.

So, too, the sexuality that Nin would utilize to kick open her own doors of perception is not quite right here. Kaufman attempts to use a sultry, stylized sexuality interrupted by jarring bits of reality as a way of capturing Nin's prose/poetry sexuality. The closest he comes to capturing Nin's sexuality is the scene where Nin and Miller make love on a chair next to a boiling pot of soup. The raw, graphic quality of that scene achieves a poetry instead of imposing it.

So my objection, writing and observing as a male, is that a male has made this film. Somewhere there seems to be a secret voice that men just can't seem to echo. One sees it here most explicitly at two points.

Anaïs and husband Hugo venture forth to buy two prostitutes and have them make love like a man and a woman. When the prostitute playing the man asks if they would like any variations, Anaïs responds that she wants the woman to stop performing a male role and to make love like a woman. If this scene begins as a metaphor for Nin's sexual, emotional and literary search, it goes wrong. The sexual performance which Kaufman has presented so graphically suddenly goes out of focus, just at the point where it should achieve clarity—just as the film does in general with any direct feminist or lesbian scene. Lesbianism, in particular, remains tantalizing only as long as at least one partner plays the masculine role. If it is two women becoming totally feminine, it becomes too difficult for poor Kaufman.

Now that I have appeared to so thoroughly trounce the film, let me write that this film is, honestly, well-nigh great. The sexual war between masculine and feminine views, and we should tie in heterosexual and same-sex views, is such heavily mined territory that if I find fault with Kaufman for not knowing how to land on target with both feet, I do that with the recognition that for most folks these days it is difficult to figure out just where to land. That Kaufman has had his wife, Rose, work with him on the screenplay is to his credit. *Henry & June* is about a sexual tug-of-war which is simultaneously intellectual and primal. That Kaufman feels up to stepping into the fray between two literary giants such as Nin and Miller shows considerable courage and, despite my nit-picking, he succeeds often enough. Any work of art which forces me to wrangle with my own perceptions, and my perceptions of other people's perceptions, is well worth the effort. Good exercise for the brain and the heart.

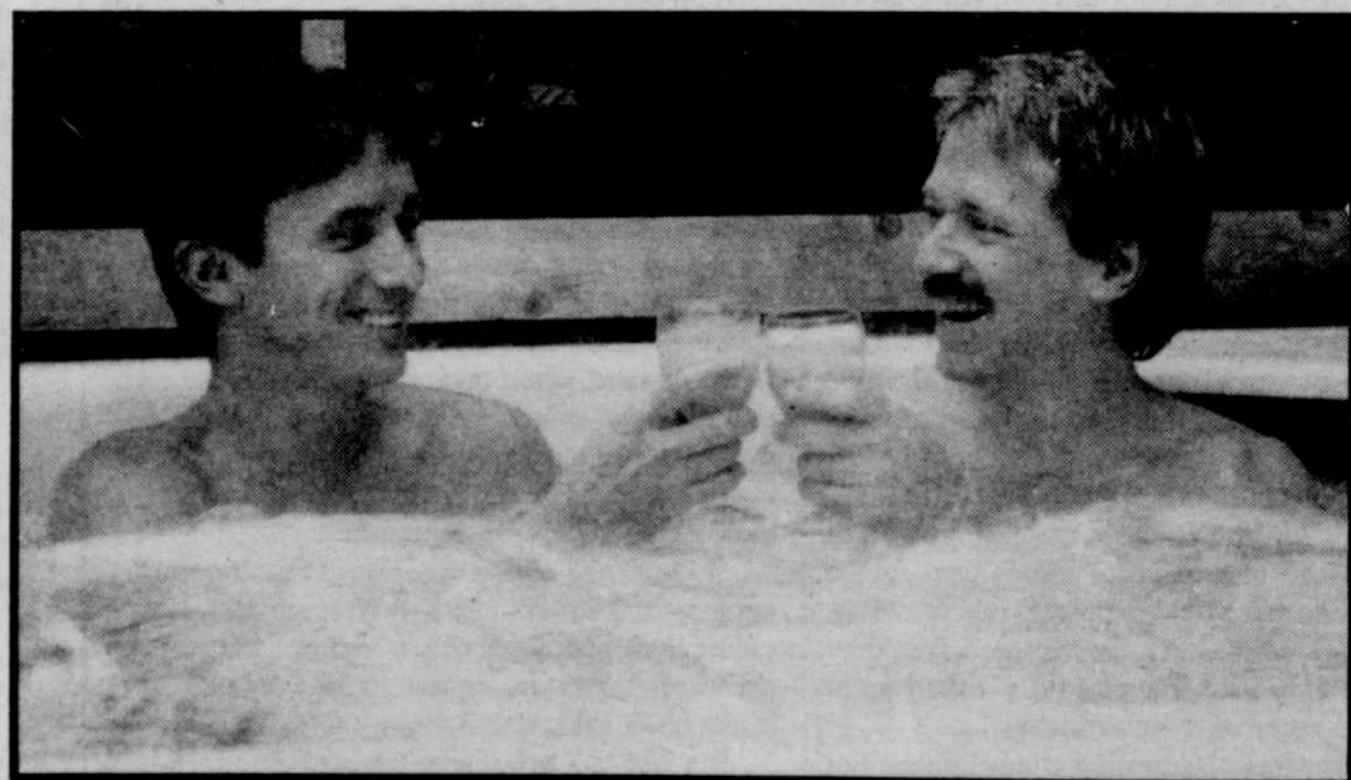
Go to this and prepare to be jarred, offended, inspired, challenged and then to walk outside having to (and more importantly wanting to) think about it all for awhile. Whether you agree with the movie or not is, in the end, not really the point. The point is learning how to grow.

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