

If the U.S. independent film market is healthy, it's because so many "small" (i.e., non-big studio) films are making money in the increasingly competitive marketplace by appealing to a constituency that is turned off by the wretched scripts being filmed by the majors. Movies that wrap themselves snugly around the vagaries of the human condition are touching sensitive intelligence-nerves in the body cultural. One such from Miramax, *The Substance*

Cinema

of *Fire*, was written by gay writer Jon Robin Baitz (based on his off-Broadway hit play) and directed by Seattle stage veteran Daniel Sullivan as his first feature. Baitz, 33, comes from Los Angeles but now lives in Manhattan. *Substance* is his first film script.

It's a film, by the way, that is marvelous in look and tone, and that features the award-winning performance of its off-Broadway star, Ron Rifkin, backed up by stalwarts Tony Goldwyn, Timothy Hutton and Sarah Jessica Parker.

But it is Rifkin who will galvanize attention to the film. He's one of maybe a hundred of the best actors around, the kind usually found in small regional theaters, actors doing intrepid and sterling work generally unrecognized by the public. But when the "role of a lifetime" rolls around, allowing for a theatrical match made in heaven, any actor will make whatever sacrifices he or she needs to take it. In *Substance*, the 57-year-old Rifkin gives one of those transcendent performances—a singularly powerful characterization that defies comparison. It stands out as one of the best male screen performances in the past 20 years, and is a distillation of a lifetime of work and study.

Baitz had reacted strongly when he first saw Rifkin perform, in Williamstown, Mass., in Arthur Miller's *The American Clock*. He was moved to say those fabled words: "Someday I'm going to write a part for you." He kept his word, and a year after their meeting handed him the first act of *Substance*. Rifkin starred in its hit run off-Broadway, ultimately winning an Obie Award for his performance. Both the original director, Sullivan, and Baitz held out for Rifkin to repeat his role on screen.

It wasn't always clear that Rifkin could be kept on board, simply because he's not a "star" in the sense that Hollywood recognizes—someone who can sell a picture on name alone. But since *Substance* was a difficult sell anyway (being an intelligent, complex story), they thought, why not do it up right? So writer and director cast it and raised enough money to begin filming. After a couple of weeks the funds ran out; they then had the common sense to approach Rifkin's younger brother, Arnold, who is a major force with the William Morris Agency (he heads up the Motion Picture Division).

"Arnold took a sample reel Danny had made to Harvey [Weinstein at Miramax]," Baitz says. "Certainly without his help, it wouldn't have happened."

Weinstein's one comment upon seeing the rough reel was, "This is what I get up in the morning to go to work for."

With a total budget of just under \$2,000,000 (inexpensive as films go), and with set pieces begged for and borrowed, they completed shooting on time. Ah, the power of connections.

Baitz's story concerns Isaac Geldhart (Rifkin), a Holocaust survivor who has become a successful book publisher in New York by marrying into a wealthy family which bankrolled the company. The dead wife has willed her share of the com-

pany—55 percent—to her three children, and when the eldest son, Aaron (Goldwyn), tries to publish his lover's racy novel in order to have a hit book which will save the publishing house from going under (the arrogant Old World-bred father insists on bringing out important but nonselling titles), he is forced to organize a putsch with his brother and sister (Hutton and Parker) which effectively retires Isaac. Père Geldhart then goes into a psychiatric decline. It is this dynamic of family love and biblical-level conflict which drives the film.

Baitz describes his experience of co-producing as exhilarating and frustrating. "I wrote [the screenplay] with training wheels on—I'm still

this world and one foot in the other; he's Jude the Obscure in the way he understands the nature of loss and sacrifice." Parker was able to repeat her original role. "Sarah has a terrible lot in life, relegated as she is to being Daddy's Little Girl. Tony [Goldwyn] gave us what we wanted—it's an extraordinary performance: feral and uncertain. Aaron's very conscious of being a warrior and hating that role—a man who defends the breaking of the code of fealty to his leader; I thought Hotspur, Richard III, Edmund and Hamlet with him. Aaron's the only person in the story to have a real live relationship with another human."

One of the major changes from stage to screen



Tony Goldwyn (left), Ron Rifkin and Sarah Jessica Parker

finding my way to being adventurous as a screenwriter. But we were able to work the way we do in the theater with no 'experts' about to deny us our adventurousness."

If Baitz is anything, he is articulate. And modest: "What I'm learning about screenwriting is that where a play may circle and attack and retreat and attack again from different angles, film must move in order to survive—like sharks."

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Substance is a screenplay about war and peace and the aftermath, disguised as a family drama. It's about the destruction of family and sacrifice and less about mood and inference than was the stage-play."

Sullivan and Baitz did the casting themselves, including Timothy Hutton, for whom the role of Martin, the younger son, was written. "Tim was unable to do it on stage [Patrick Breen played it] but was available for the film. He has one foot in

was making Aaron a gay man in a relationship, as opposed to being a former bisexual. "By the time we filmed, it struck me that it was a bit late in the day to be coy about his sexuality. In the eight years since I began the play, I've found it best not to beat around the bush; those are not struggles I have much patience or interest in any more. Aaron shouldn't have to hide today, as his sexuality isn't an issue in his world."

When Baitz first started writing the play, he says, "I was a little bit—not closeted exactly—but a little bit noncommittal and opaque, a bit private. In the film, Isaac is totally fine about [Aaron's sexuality] and his brother and sister accept it, too."

Rifkin has been a working actor for most of his 37 professional years, although he did take a seven-year hiatus to care for his

father's furrier business during the elder Rifkin's latter years. He won the Obie for his work in *Substance* on stage and is well-known throughout the country for his repertory stage work, in addition to his screen work [Woody Allen's *Husbands and Wives* and Mike Nichols' *Wolf*] and his two-year stint as Sharon Gless' boss on *The Trials of Rosie O'Neill*. One of the striking elements in his performance is the perfect European accent he uses, which he says was totally made up. "Yiddish was my first language. My mother was born here, my maternal grandfather was Hasidic, and my father came from Russia, and so having been born in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn the sounds of Europe were all around me. When my brother [the agent] and I saw the first rough-cut of the film, as it wound towards the end, we kept inching closer to each other, needing to touch in some way and ended up holding hands. After it was over, Arnold looked at me and said, 'That was Dad.' And it was true. I had in some weird way become my father. I had stolen his expressions and sounds and walk, the way he smoked. Our father wasn't anything like Isaac, but over that five-year period [from the first stage rehearsal to the final shoot date], I had

slowly absorbed my father in the role. I had combined him with Robbie's [Baitz's] character and added on the Belgian-German accent I had unconsciously developed."

Baitz is an intellectual, and his oeuvre concerns situations in which characters must confront their own denials. In *The Film Society*, his first play, which is set in South Africa, a character is forced to explore his racism; *Three Hotels* is about what happens when corporate insensitivity destroys an executive's family. And in the ongoing and unequal fight of Art vs. Mammon in the United States, he gives no quarter: "I think it's more complicated than we know, because the number of entities which are interested in art and preserving a culture and a cultural discourse are thinning out, so you reach a point in your society when all your exhilaration and exaltation becomes heavily skewed towards the popular arts, those which are without ambivalence: fast, certain and disposable. They always were [in conflict with] ruminative and contemplative and problematic things which fit in nowhere else, the conundrums, riddles and unanswerable things not readily absorbed. I look at art today in much the same way as the ancients labeled the drawings on their maps, designating the

unknown areas as 'Monsters Be Here.' I have some melancholy over our tentative relationship to the world, when the things we believe in are not held worth thinking of. And yet I'm astonished when I meet young people, [on college campuses] I found 18-year-old kids rejecting the simplification of the culture; rejecting a speedy electronic culture. They've assimilated it brilliantly, but haven't incorporated it at the expense of everything else. I found the kids actively engaged in a dialogue. I think there's something cyclical at hand; it's in the nature of kids to rebel—and now we must wait until they rebel against Nintendo."

Baitz's significant other/lover/partner/husband/boyfriend of the past six years is Joe Mantello, a recognized actor and director. Known by insiders as the First Out Gay Family of the American Theater, they have managed only one theatrical collaboration so far: Mantello directed Ron Rifkin in Baitz's *Three Hotels* off-Broadway in 1992. Currently he has the new Craig Lucas play, plus the new Neil Simon piece to direct. Increasingly successful, the lovers have finally bought a house on Long Island. But when will they have time to enjoy it?

The Substance of Fire opens March 21 at KOIN Center Cinemas. For show times and ticket prices, call 225-5555, category 4608.