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The High Art of getting ahead

Hollywood honchos beware: Lisa Cholodenko's first feature has her on the fast track to fame

BY WILL O'BRYAN

In today's economy, the fresh crop of young professionals working to make names for themselves struggle in the shadow of baby boomers who don't seem to be in any hurry to take early retirement. Your local twenty-something barista may well hold a master's degree yet can't find a job with health insurance.

Nevertheless, some young lions creatively find ways to climb the ladders of their respective careers. The character Syd (Radha Mitchell) is one such achiever—fictional though she may be—and writer-director Lisa Cholodenko's debut feature film, *High Art*, subtly chronicles her climb.

High Art is not straightforward. One could argue that Cholodenko's story has more to do with Syd's spontaneous romantic involvement with photographer Lucy Berliner (Ally Sheedy) than with her résumé.

Sheedy has been absent from film lately. Watching her portrayal of Lucy, though, immediately reminds one of her misfit character in *The Breakfast Club*. It's so easy to imagine the morose high school girl from John Hughes' glory days who sulked about eating Cap'n Crunch and Pixie Stix sandwiches and touting her beverage of

coaxes Lucy out of her 10-year professional hiatus. Lucy is willing to take small steps back to the life she left behind, but only with Syd holding her hand. As the intensity of their involvement escalates, it's not clear if Syd is holding Lucy's hand or pulling it.

Whether Syd is calculating enough to be aware of her manipulations is debatable. And that debate is where *High Art*'s real drama lies.

Simultaneously, Syd begins ignoring her live-in boyfriend (Gabriel Mann) as she discovers Lucy, who is trying to kick her heroin habit and re-establish her photography career as a result of Syd's prodding. While Lucy's original relationship dissolves, Greta fights—as well as a drug-addled mess can—for Lucy's attention.

Switching from Cholodenko as writer to Cholodenko as director, she's filmed a picture that swims calmly through troubled waters. Her style is fluid. She and the rest of the technical crew created a setting colored heavily by pastel greens and blues that soothe as well as evoke images of *Martha Stewart Living* or a Pottery Barn catalog. The music is ambient, watery and



Patricia Clarkson (left), Ally Sheedy and Radha Mitchell (inset)

choice—"vodka...lots of it"—as the young Lucy Berliner. In *High Art*, she's added heroin to her menu and lives in New York City with her German girlfriend, Greta (Patricia Clarkson), a has-been Fassbinder actress and junkie.

Clarkson's Greta often steals the show from Mitchell and Sheedy. Apparently taking inspiration from Marlene Dietrich and Jeanne Moreau, she smolders despite her zombie-like composure. Mitchell wears a poker face. Sheedy, as a fairly butch lesbian, gets a little rough.

Syd meets upstairs neighbor Lucy while investigating a leak in her ceiling. Looking like a babe in the woods among Lucy and Greta's friends, Syd is intimidated, but captivated.

Twenty-four-year-old Syd's career has taken her to an assistant editor's position at *Frame*, a photography magazine. The promotion is mostly meaningless, as her duties include fetching coffee and letting her superiors take professional advantage of her. But once Syd realizes Lucy Berliner is a famed photographer inaccessible to her *Frame* bosses, Syd has an ace up her sleeve.

Syd pursues Lucy and Lucy is charmed. Syd

moving. The mood they've set prevents any piece of the film from being too jarring. It's designed to lull an audience and let viewers float through the characters' lives.

Were an edgier director filming *High Art*, some scenes would've been unsettling. But under Cholodenko, even Greta's near-death overdose seems like just another slice-of-life occurrence, rather than a reason to call 911.

This soothing style, though, is exactly what makes the whole story unnerving. In the moment, Syd's actions don't seem questionable. But once the end credits start rolling and reality reasserts its harsher tones, there's a compulsion to re-evaluate. Is she an innocent golden girl or a cold, self-promoting pirate? The answer never comes.

Cholodenko's ability to pacify viewers, allowing her to plant a moral debate in their psyches, is skillful. *High Art* is beautiful to watch and the story is provocative enough to leave you digesting it for days.

■ *HIGH ART* opens June 26 at KOIN Center Cinemas, Southwest Third Avenue and Clay Street. Call 225-5555, ext. 4608, for show times.