

CINEMA

## Pretty in pink

In the new film *Get Real*, a gay adolescent wonders: Why must he be a teenager in love?

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

**R**emember *Pretty in Pink*, the most perfect teen film of all time? Molly Ringwald's brave lips never trembled so sadly before or since, and I lay all the blame for my never-ending infatuation with shy geeks at the feet of Jon Cryer's adorable, lovelorn Duckie.

Well, there may not be any prom anxiety or exploration of class issues in the new British film *Get Real*, but in spirit it's the (sorely needed) *Pretty in Pink* for gay kids. *Get Real* is set in a comfortable middle-class suburb, where Steven (Ben Silverstone) and John (Brad Gorton), two 16-year-old students, go to the same high school.

Steven knows he's gay and has been doing some rather reckless sexual exploration in public restrooms and parks. On one of these restroom excursions, by perfect coincidence, the unseen boy with whom he's flirting by passing notes through a hole between two stalls turns out to be...John!

acceptance for his relationship with Steven, and attempts to hang on to both by asking Steven to keep their love hidden. Steven acquiesces, but begins to feel lonely and rejected, feelings he'd hoped his relationship with John would alleviate. This adversity brings with it the realization that he has no choice but to justify the unnaturally cheerful title of the film and *Get Real*—that is, start living his life openly despite the fact that his parents and friends are hardly queer-positive, or that it may cost him John.

In the climactic scene, Steven, accepting an award for academic excellence at a school assembly that conveniently includes everybody who's been in the film up to this point, makes an impromptu speech announcing his homosexuality and rallying for acknowledgment and understanding of gay teens. The speech, as per the *Pretty in Pink* protocol, gets rather more instantaneous, positive results than seem realis-

Ben Silverstone and Charlotte Britain in *Get Real*



John's a jock, a dreamboat, and also the Big Man on Campus. Steven, of course, never even considered that John might be anything more than a fantasy object. Steven is so shocked—and mildly gratified—at meeting John in such a compromising situation that he barely has time to get a word in before John has made a hasty, awkward retreat. Steven begins to seek out John's company both in and out of school, and John soon reveals that he has also sort of experimented, but isn't entirely certain that he likes boys. After much earnest discussion and soul searching—earnest emotion being the endearing native tongue of the teen-ager—John decides he's gay enough to fall madly in love with Steven.

Their affair is, of course, dizzying in its romantic perfection. Thankfully, director Simon Jones isn't afraid to expose us to the undiluted sugar rush of teen-age love. They run exuberantly through the trees with each other, like you know you dreamed of doing with all your teen-age crushes. I'm just surprised and a little disappointed they didn't have these guileless youngsters make eyes at each other over a one-glass, two-straw soda or share a plate of spaghetti à la *Lady and the Tramp*.

But then things go awry. In the film's testament to the hellish indignity that is high school, John can't sacrifice his popularity and

tic. Any classmates who've been depicted as mean, petty or quasi-homophobic, as well as the ignorant school administration, look uncomfortable and ashamed of themselves. The rest of the kids give Steven's speech a hearty round of applause; his mother is just ecstatic that her son has decided to stop living a lie; and even his manly-man father is at worst mildly disgruntled.

It's so very unlikely that any of this would ever happen outside of this film, but the lost cinematic art of effectively presenting life as it *should* be is the joyful accomplishment of *Get Real*. Idealism vs. real life is the paradox behind any good teen film. Harsh reality starts seeping in fast enough once you hit adolescence, and queer youth are hardly excluded from that; this is why *Get Real* can be excused—and lauded—without reservation for its total lack of sophistication, its insulin-shock sweetness, and its faith that, if you believe in and stand up for yourself, things will go magically right. It's the film equivalent of cotton candy: light and airy, bad for you, and sure to please the kids and anybody who still dreams like one.

■ *GET REAL* opens May 21 at KOIN Cinemas, Southwest Third Avenue and Clay Street in Portland. Call (503) 225-5555, ext. 4608, for show times.



Ron Athey

## Blood, sweat and queers

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

**H**allelujah! Ron Athey: *A Story of Deliverance*, a documentary from director Catherine Gund Saalfield, is not a film for everyone. Her subject is Los Angeles-based performance artist Ron Athey, who achieved infamy in 1990 when, as part of his performance art piece *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, cuts were made in the back of an HIV-positive performer. Subsequently, "prints" were taken on paper towels from the flow of blood and strung out on clotheslines above the audience.

The film contains footage of Athey—a gay, HIV-positive former heroin addict from Pentecostal roots—and his troupe performing various pieces in different cities around the globe. Excerpts from *Harsh Life* and two other Athey shows are interspersed with interview footage of Athey and his performers. There are many graphic, disturbing images, including very extreme scenes of scatology, bloodletting, genital mutilation and torture.

Two things become quite clear in *Hallelujah!*: Saalfield is a competent filmmaker, and Athey is not a very good artist. It's irritating to see Athey and company yammering about how they want to be immortalized by their art, and then perform a piece that strongly resembles the shows Goth kids put on at the old City Nightclub. Which is to say, the pieces are blatantly pretentious, amateurish, reactionary and full of anachronistic, clumsy ideas of religion and darkness that could've come from the simplistic brain of Marilyn Manson. Absolutely acceptable—and much more compelling—coming from adolescents, but not from an adult artist.

Nevertheless, the poorness of Athey's art doesn't make Saalfield's film any less fascinating, as she's neither groupie nor sycophant. She is to be commended for her unflinching eye, and for having the courage to use failed art to show us that art, good or bad, and the people who make it are subjects worth exploring.

■ The Northwest Film Center presents HALLELUJAH! RON ATHEY: A STORY OF DELIVERANCE at 9:30 p.m. May 21 through 24 at the Guild Theater, 829 S.W. Ninth Ave. in Portland. Mature audiences only. For more information, call the NWFC at (503) 221-1156, or visit its Internet site at [www.nwfilm.org](http://www.nwfilm.org).



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