

FILMS

Stop making sense

Disconnected characters cross paths in *The Five Senses*, troubled Waters gets his wires crossed in *Cecil B. Demented*

BY ORIANA GREEN AND CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

THE FIVE SENSES

Right about now, the glut of summer flicks aimed at teen boys is dissipating, making room for some films that might appeal to a slightly older crowd, say over 20. If you like moody, introspective human dramas, then *The Five Senses* might be just your ticket—the queer content is a bonus.

Canadian Jeremy Podeswa directs his own script and drapes his intertwining stories on architecture both real and metaphoric. Each character has some connection to one building in Toronto and has a story line exploring one of the senses, often with a twist—a masseuse is out of touch with her daughter, a pastry chef bakes flavorless cakes, a baby sitter loses sight of her charge while she's busy being a voyeur.

Podeswa, an openly gay filmmaker who is one of the founders of the Toronto Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, spoke with *Just Out* recently from Toronto, where he is in preproduction on his next film, *Wild Geese*. He says the writing of *The Five Senses* began not with a story but with fascinating details from a book by Diane Ackerman, *The Natural History of the Senses*.

"So many different experiences are available to us; we take senses for granted—and people as well," he explains. "I really like structural devices, as long as they're in service to the story."

Podeswa sees the key players as members of one big dysfunctional family, and the building they all pass through functions as their village.

Mary-Louise Parker, who forever endeared herself to lesbians with her role in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, plays Rona, the baker who only is concerned with how her avant-garde cakes look. She does begin to appreciate her sense of taste when her Italian lover shows up unexpectedly and moves in with her.

Roberto fixes romantic feasts for her, in and out of the bedroom. When Rona's gay friend Robert drops by, he notices the change in her.

"Of course I look good," she tells him. "All I do is fuck and eat!"

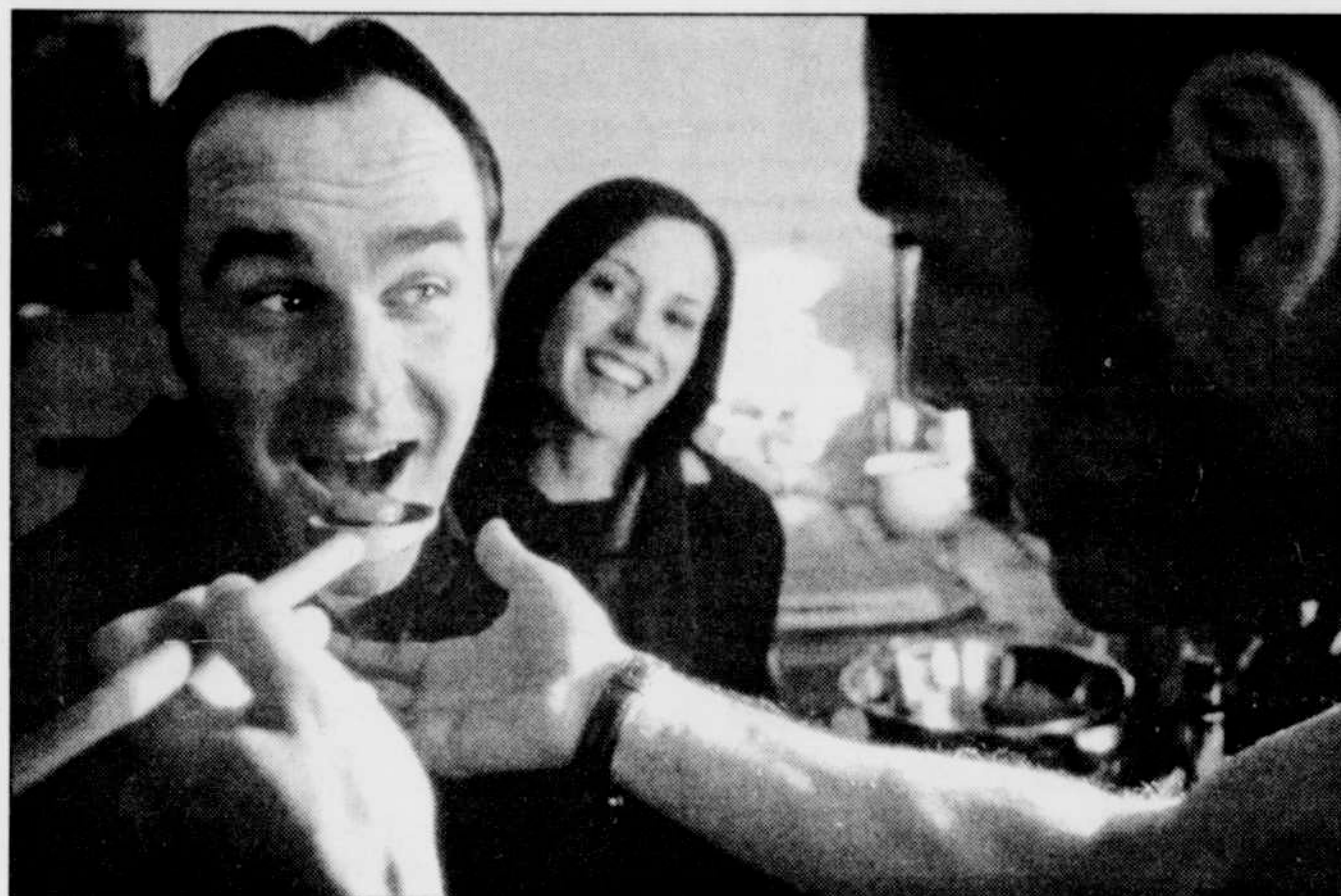
But Roberto's commandeering of her kitchen starts to wear on her. "He's like Julia Child with a blender up his ass," she tells Robert.

The film is very much about people in search of connectedness. At one point, Robert asks Rona, "Do you think we use each other to avoid intimacy with other people?"

But she doesn't want to go there. She does, however, use visits to her dying mother as a way of avoiding the problematic Roberto.

"Don't use me; go home and deal with him," her mother tells her. "You can see me tomorrow; I'll still be sick."

In another poignant scene of disconnectedness, a young man receiving a massage from Ruth



Roberto inflicts his taste on Robert as Rona looks on

tells her, "Nobody's touched me in such a long time." As he cries softly, she whispers, "I know," a reference to her own recent widowhood.

Ruth's daughter, Rachel, searches for connectedness by befriending Rupert, a young man she recognizes as another misfit. (Yes, virtually all the characters' names begin with R. Podeswa says it all started when he named a character after his mother, Ruth—and apparently couldn't stop!)

Rupert and Rachel find a hideaway in an abandoned building, where she helps him transform into a female. "I feel mysterious from the neck up and exotic from the neck down," he tells her as he kisses his image in a shard of mirror.

Rachel offers him this perceptive observation: "It's like looking at you inside out."

Robert, the gay pal, is the character chosen to explore the sense of smell. He's convinced that by smelling all his former lovers, he'll be able to discern if any of them still loves him.

Podeswa shares his queer casting theory: "I include gay characters when it's appropriate. If you're making a film about people looking for love, you have to include us because we're part of the world."

The film has many layers of reality and illusion. One especially touching character is

Richard, an optometrist who is going deaf and who loves to eavesdrop on his next-door neighbor, who has a singing studio. As Podeswa explains, "We make certain assumptions about people all the time that aren't true."

What's true about *The Five Senses* is it's a rich, complex story that avoids tidy endings. Much like real life, few relationships ever resolve themselves in neat packages. —OG

CECIL B. DEMENTED

It's hard to understand how *Cecil B. Demented*, the new film from notorious queer director and undisputed master of underground trash/camp John Waters (*Pink Flamingos*, *Hairspray*), ended up just this side of bland.

The premise: Crazed young independent filmmaker Cecil Demented (Stephen Dorff) and his motley crew of underground-cinema-obsessed outsiders kidnap spoiled Hollywood starlet Honey Whitlock (Melanie Griffith) and force her to act in their zero-budget movie. It seems like it would make for vintage, vicious Waters, who began his career with virtually homemade, aggressively indelicate films and had to scrounge for any budget he ever got.

So why does this purported sweet-revenge,

anti-mainstream vitriol seem so dispassionate, forced and detached, lacking the sharpness even of his last movie, 1998's meanderingly autobiographical *Pecker*? The answer lies in the fact that Waters' writing—normally so full of twisted, satirical jabs and hilariously perverse dialogue—is weak here; judging from his past work, the film's numerous laugh-free moments could have been remedied with a little inspired jotting.

Unfortunately, as the unfunny moments drag, questions seep in: Why does Whitlock, who at the beginning of the film is dyed-in-the-wool Hollywood and a headstrong bitch, give in so easily to Demented's agenda? And why does Waters spend such an inordinate amount of time and energy taking one-sided potshots at the easy target of Hollywood while trying to pass off his same old bizarre marginal protagonists (who nowadays don't even seem that marginal or bizarre) as an implausibly idealistic indie film crew?

Cecil B. Demented has quite a few bright spots thanks to Griffith, who actually seems more game for going over the top than the script allows for, and has some pointed, funny tirades against Hollywood sequelitis and those reprobates who dare enter a movie theater after the feature has started (you know who you are). However, the film puts an undue emphasis throughout on ordinary things like plot and characterization, which never have been Waters' strong suits, as they detract from his usually arbitrary and obscenely funny scenarios and dialogue.

It has its moments, but ultimately, although the director's characteristic gross-outs remain, it's more mundanely cheesy than thrillingly trashy. This is unthinkable from Waters, who always has gotten his kicks (and given us ours) by sharply criticizing and parodying the merely mundane and cheesy.

He once boasted that he creates "lowbrow films for highbrow audiences," which makes the finally middlebrow *Cecil B. Demented* subpar by his own standards. —CM

■ THE FIVE SENSES will be shown 8 p.m. Aug. 19 at the Hollywood Theatre, 4122 N.E. Sandy Blvd., as a fund-raiser for Portland's LGBT Film Festival, followed by a party at the nearby Chameleon Restaurant. Tickets are \$15 from the theater box office, *Gai Pied*, *In Other Words* and *Balloons on Broadway*. For more information, send e-mail to pdxgayfilm@aol.com. The film will open theatrically Aug. 25.

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