

FILM

# Hollywood and the hills

Queer-positive films *The Anniversary Party* and *Songcatcher* are mixed bags

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

That old Hollywood joke that actors all day-dream of directing is a cliché, but it's less frequently mentioned that actors do seem to make good directors. Films in recent years by Robert Duvall (*The Apostle*), Jodie Foster (*Home for the Holidays*), Sean Penn (*The Pledge*) and Liv Ullmann (*Faithless*), all of whom made their names as actors, have been rather well received.

So one goes into *The Anniversary Party*, the new film co-written and co-directed by (and starring!) Jennifer Jason Leigh and Alan Cumming, optimistically assuming the direction at least will showcase the well-aimed spontaneity and inventiveness that both actors usually manifest in front of the camera. It's a letdown, then, that the first third of the movie contains exactly the indulgences one prejudicially would expect of a movie made by actors.

The story takes place on one fateful evening when Sally and Joe (Leigh and Cumming), in celebration of the surprising longevity of their troubled marriage, throw themselves a sixth anniversary party at their exclusive hilltop home outside Los Angeles. The setting is ripe for expository anecdotes and confessions from the couple and their guests; the problem is, at least half of the attendees (high-powered Hollywood industry characters played by Leigh and Cumming's famous actor friends) are frankly extraneous.

It seems that in this case, the casting/writing eyes were bigger than the production stomach, and as the guests arrive and begin to mingle, some of the performers are required to enact seemingly interminable scenes of pointless, belabored quirkiness. (Joe's bisexuality—one of the guests is his well-wishing ex-boyfriend—is, happily for the film's queer audience, not a mere quirk but simply an acceptable part of Joe and Sally's history, coming up

incidentally and passing with little comment.)

*The Anniversary Party* takes much longer to lose interest in its tiresome detours than the audience undoubtedly will. This is a shame, because in the final hour, when it finally focuses on dissecting the relationships between the couple and the more integral guests, confessions are made, wounds are opened, and the film dives exhilaratingly from its oblivious ozone to plumb some rare emotional depths.

Watching Joe and Sally evolve from a flip-pant, irritating pair of showbiz superficialities into a real couple with shattering insecurities, a scarred past, terrible secrets and a tender, fragile bond is authentically moving. *The Anniversary Party* is deeply flawed by its scattershot initial setup, but its end stretch is almost extraordinary enough to redeem it.

Jane Adams, a fine character actor and one of the more poorly utilized acting talents in *The Anniversary Party*, also has a prominent supporting role in *Songcatcher*, written and directed by Maggie Greenwald.

Janet McTeer (*Tumbleweeds*) stars as the film's protagonist, Dr. Lily Penleric. She is a musicologist at the turn of the century who, feeling forced to leave a prestigious college after being passed over for a promotion because she's a woman, moves to a tiny Appalachian community where her sister Elna (Adams)

teaches school. She intends to pursue her project of collecting, transcribing and recording the indigenous music of mountain people.

But things don't go exactly as Lily planned. She has trouble getting her research subjects—poor people who have not had good experiences at the hands of the learned and privileged—to trust her, and she discovers, to her horror, that Elna's female roommate is actually her lover.

Lily condemns her sister and remains aloof from the community; with everyone well alienated, she realizes she must learn new ways of perceiving and communicating with her fellow human beings. However, even as she makes headway in her research and repairing her relationship with her sister, religious fundamentalists interfere, leading to a tragedy that destroys her sister's happy home and ruins Lily's research.

To Greenwald's credit, she avoids patronizing any of her characters; even the fire-and-brimstone fundamentalists aren't painted with too broad a brush, and the lesbian story line in particular is handled with a remarkable degree of understanding and subtlety.

The film's real subject—the ethics and social



Leigh and Cumming team up to throw quite a party

politics of entering a community and recording its culture—seems fascinating and valid. The music is impeccably researched; Greenwald obviously has spent time with the Smithsonian *American Anthology of Folk Music*.

But she seems to lose all restraint when it comes to the trite love-interest story line

involving Tom Bledsoe (Aidan Quinn), a local man who plays guitar and causes Lily, entirely out of character, to swoon. These sequences, a constant distraction from the more worthy parts of the story, display an unbecoming sentimentality, contradicting and undermining the film's stoic dignity.

Although *The Anniversary Party* bests *Songcatcher* by virtue of its almost-successful unconventionality and emotional power, they both must be called interesting failures. Neither is a waste of time, but be forewarned: The former is like having the unfunniest bits of *L.A. Story* spliced into a Bergman film, and the latter is like catching Willa Cather cribbing from a supermarket romance paperback. [C]

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland writer and tireless observer of pop culture.

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