

FILM

# Sex scandal! Stoner mayhem! Boarding school girls!

*The Deep End* excites; Kevin Smith aggravates; *Lost and Delirious* disappoints BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

**T**he *Deep End*, a new film by the writing/producing/directing team of Scott McGehee and David Siegel, is a dark, taut thriller that provides its thrills through carefully constructed atmosphere, perfect pacing and wonderfully unusual performances.

It's also exemplary of an authentic strain of progressiveness making its way into all genres of cinema. Its gay characters and gay-themed subplot are not representative stick figures but real people whose flaws and virtues have little to do with their sexual orientation.

Tilda Swinton (the reputable English actress who starred in much of Derek Jarman's great queer cinema, Sally Potter's *Orlando* and Tim Roth's *The War Zone*) stars as a housewife named Margaret Hall, who lives with her father-in-law and children on the California side of Lake Tahoe. Her Navy captain husband is almost always gone, leaving his family ensconced in an expensive-looking, chilly cottage that has all the appeal of an *Architectural Digest* spread.

Her eldest, Beau, is an almost-legal musical prodigy, Ivy League college applicant and growing worry. Margaret has had to rescue him from a drunken driving accident in which a suspicious "friend" of his named Darby Reece, the significantly older owner of a gay nightclub, was the passenger. She suspects the two are more than friends and heads to Reno to confront Darby.

That night, he shows up at their home and furtively meets with Beau in the boathouse, where his reptilian nature is revealed when he admits he was willing to accept money from Margaret to stay away from Beau, who's convinced Darby had real feelings for him. They fight, and Beau flees the scene.

The next day, Margaret finds Darby's body, impaled on an anchor, washed up on the beach. Margaret assumes Beau has killed the predatory man and hides the body.

To make her bad day worse, a blackmailer (the excellent Goran Visnjic) shows up with a videotape of Darby and Beau having sex. As Margaret struggles to keep up her soccer-mom household duties and come up with \$50,000 to keep the tape from being made public, the blackmailer begins to seem more complex than he appears. All the sublimely noirish goings-on

build to a devastating, quietly acute climax, one of the most gratifying of any film I've seen this year.

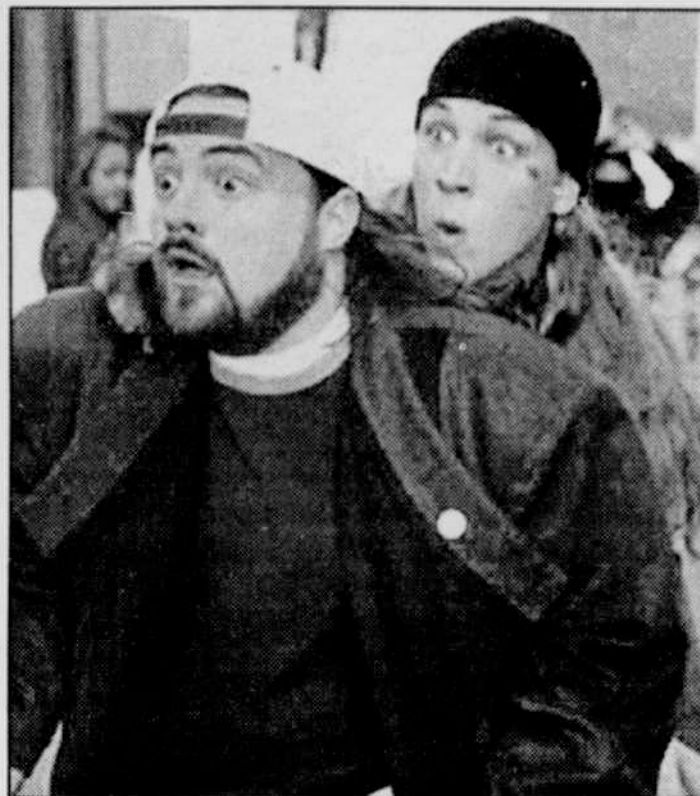
*The Deep End* has all the simultaneous stoicism and tingly, creeping dread of a classic film noir (it actually is based on the 1949 Max Ophüls film *The Reckless Moment*). It's also gracefully, beautifully shot; the visual connotations in some scenes are so good, so revealing, it's actually startling.

Everything is exquisitely underplayed and subtle. The performances, especially Swinton's, are rightfully austere and tight-lipped; as in a David Mamet film, they're crisply starched without being stuffy or sterile.

*The Deep End* might not actually be great cinema—there are too many minor missteps for that—but it's an unequivocally good film. Compare it to its immediate competition in the suspense-thriller and queer-indie subgenres, though, and it might as well be *Citizen Kane*.

**L**ike much media watchdogging, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's attack on filmmaker Kevin Smith for his latest attempt at cinema, *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, is an unwarranted bit of wolf-crying, giving the cultural product at its center far too much credit (not to mention free publicity). The idea that this movie contains anything significant or even tangible enough to be considered offensive will seem laughable to anyone who actually sits through it.

Ostensibly the tale of how the two title characters make their way to Hollywood to prevent a film based on them from being made, *Jay and Silent Bob* is little more than a running series of episodic sketches involving the crude misadventures of the pothead losers, who in fact are based on comic book characters created by Smith (who plays Silent Bob). The characters have popped up briefly in other Smith movies—*Clerks* as well as the surprisingly thoughtful and queer-positive *Chasing Amy*—apparently as a



Is Kevin Smith (left, with Jason Mewes) a homophobe? Does it matter?

nod to the army of comic book geeks who worship the director for the same reason we film nerds worship Martin Scorsese; he's a fellow geek who somehow made good.

To Smith's credit, he makes some brave attempts at self-parody and zestfully bites the hand that feeds him; Miramax, the distributor of *Jay and Silent Bob*, is made tidy satirical work of. The endless cameos by notables such as Carrie Fisher, Chris Rock, Gus Van Sant, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck are actually funny.

But most of the film is as belabored as a panting dog, dimly struggling to be provocative, fresh, irreverent and snappy. It doesn't work.

Instead, we're treated to Smith's tired Gen X cultural references and conflicted, barely disguised adolescent sexual frustration. This means



From left, Lea Pool directs Jessica Paré, Piper Perabo and Mischa Barton in *Lost and Delirious*

most of the humor is at the *Beavis and Butt-head* level, significantly less charming in execution than the notorious animated pair.

The film's ballyhooed "homophobia" is just the clichéd, clearly wrongheaded and cruel yet

essentially meaningless paranoia of teen-age straight boys whose (presumably hetero) sexuality hasn't yet matured into any semblance of confidence or security. There is also, of course, bathroom and genital humor aplenty, all done with a smugness suggesting Smith labors under the erroneous delusion that he's a) original and b) really sticking it to the strait-laced P.C. Establishment with his pseudo-chauvinism and cocksucking jokes.

All of which is fine when done right. It's hard not to laugh at the crude breeziness of such dumb-duo comedies as *Wayne's World*, *Dick* and even *Romy and Michelle's High School Reunion*.

This film's downfall is its joylessness. Smith doesn't seem to understand that mere vulgarity, however harsh, is undermined by actual seriousness. His film is self-conscious and self-impressed—a lame, fatuous, terminally disingenuous act of wannabe naughtiness.

**A** couple of years ago, I had the pleasure of seeing and raving about *Set Me Free*, a realist but pretty kitchen-sink picture involving a young French Canadian girl who falls in love with a movie, eventually finding salvation through filmmaking.

It was the work of Lea Pool, herself a Quebec filmmaker. I hoped she could be added to my (far too short) list of venerable modern women filmmakers—Jane Campion, Mary Harron, Rose Troche—who, even with their quirks and imperfections taken into account, still can be counted on to bring us postfeminist/progressive/queer-positive films that are intriguing, complex and alive.

How disappointing, then, that her latest, an English-language bit of soggy called *Lost and Delirious*, is so thoroughly trite and corny, at times even to the point of degrading the actors and the audience. The plot—a naive small-town girl arrives at boarding school, where she rooms with a secretly lesbian couple and becomes entangled in the joys, disappointments and ultimate tragedy of their love—isn't a bad idea.

The earless, greeting-card tone of Judith Thompson's script, however, certainly is. Our heroine is meant to be a tragic martyr of homophobia and enforced normalcy, but any emotions or ideas Thompson and Pool attempt to signify are so generic and/or silly as to be laughable.

There are brief, fleeting glimpses of the visual poetry Pool proficiently displayed in *Set Me Free*, but *Lost and Delirious* is a misstep, a wasted opportunity. It only can be hoped it won't jeopardize her future opportunities to further the craft she already has proven herself capable of. **JM**

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland writer and filmmaker.

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