

Not surprisingly, *L.I.E.* hasn't stirred up widespread controversy despite its seemingly provocative subject matter. It lacks the pitch-black comic irony of auteur Todd Solondz's *Happiness*, which also brought the viewer uncomfortably close to the pedophile next door. More importantly, it has nary a fraction of the 1998 film's graphic sexual detail, which keeps things considerably less disturbing.

L.I.E., an acronym for Long Island Expressway, follows the peculiar relationship between 15-year-old Howie Blitzer (Paul Franklin Dano), a precocious juvenile delinquent set adrift in suburbia through the death of his mother and the neglect of his white-collar criminal father, and "Big John" Harrigan (Brian Cox), a Vietnam veteran and the neighborhood child molester.

When Howie and Gary, a slightly older fellow hooligan for whom Howie has a sexual attraction, break into John's house, the older man catches a glimpse of Howie as they make a run for it. John later tracks him down, calling him to task for his crime and disconcertingly wondering aloud what Howie has to offer him that's worth the thousands of dollars in stolen property he and Gary made off with.

John knows Gary, who's been selling his body at a seedy rest stop (a favorite John haunt) for some time, but he hasn't seen Howie before

tion—not a monster but a man rendered dangerous by his monstrous pathology.

Trailers for *Sordid Lives*, writer/director Del Shores' big-screen version of his popular stage play, make it appear colorful, quirky and rather annoying, with zany drag queen antics, Olivia Newton-John as a gum-snapping barfly singer and general "outrageousness." It's a pleasant surprise, then, that the film actually works on its own modest terms.

At first, the story does sound overly contrived and unnecessarily complicated: In small-town Texas, an aging woman dies in a hotel room when she trips over the wooden legs of her adulterous paramour. Her bereaved family includes a pragmatic but addled sister who's trying to quit smoking, two grown daughters who fight over the funeral details and a son who's been in a mental institution for 20 years for his flamboyant homosexuality and is undergoing conversion therapy with a brittle woman whose book deal depends on the unlikely theory that he can be turned hetero.

Meanwhile, her gay grandson—the 20-something offspring of the more uptight daughter—is ambivalent about leaving Los Angeles to attend the funeral, because he thinks returning to his eccentric but conservative hometown will force him either to butch it up or to come out.

Thrown into the mix are Delta Burke as the



Paul Franklin Dano (right) finds a flawed father figure in *L.I.E.*

and is instantly taken. Street-smart Howie holds his own with John, developing an odd rapport while keeping him at bay sexually.

But when Gary splits for Los Angeles and Howie's father is arrested by the FBI, the teenager turns to John, who offers him a place to stay and the chance to drive his car, a typically red, shiny, sporty signifier of midlife crisis. With Howie rendered vulnerable and alone, in such close quarters with a kindly and persuasive pedagogue who is also the only palpable adult presence in his life, the situation becomes considerably more tense.

L.I.E. (opening Oct. 5 at Fox Tower Cinemas) has some problems—most notably the too-flashy editing and intrusive soundtrack, which give some sequences an expendable, MTV feel that momentarily drains the film of its seriousness and momentum. At the same time, it's also admirably nebulous.

Cox is a perfect physical presence for John, a burly, saggy, impotent windbag full of false bravado disguising an underlying obsession that's both predatory and pathetic. Without being asked to sympathize with his destructive (not to mention illegal) predilections, we're shown how they ultimately thwart him, how sadly futile his dream of perpetual youth is. Fortunately for Howie, he sees this damaged figure the same way we see him: a contradiction to be approached with cau-

wife of the man with the wooden legs and, yes, Newton-John, who serves as the same sort of lone Greek chorus figure that Jonathan Richman played in *There's Something About Mary*.

This combination of good aesthetic choices allows the film to walk its self-imposed tightrope between shrillness and complacency. The actors are so apt and comfortable in their roles that even some bad dialogue is saved from itself through genuinely creative, collaborative delivery.

The raw shooting style and art direction are shamelessly low-budget, lending the entire affair a shopworn, lived-in feel. You practically can smell the acrid odor of cigarette smoke permeating the living room curtains.

An antidote for the film's more-than-occasional descent into the trite and too-florid is provided by Shores in the form of snappy asides, believable absurdity and pleasurably irreverent impropriety that wouldn't be out of place in a John Waters film. *Sordid Lives* (opening Oct. 5 at Hollywood Theatre) is hardly high art, but it's an entertainment more jagged, original and pleasurable than anyone had a right to expect. **J**

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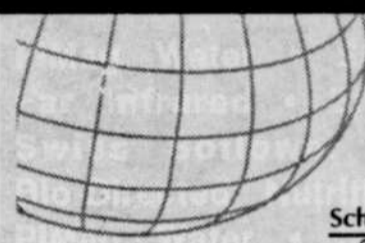
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