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FILM

Hit and miss

Punks offers nothing more than eye candy, but *Storytelling* is a triumph

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

"Punk" is African American slang for "homosexual." In the case of *Punks*, writer/director Patrik-Ian Polk uses the term to refer specifically to a group of four disparate men of color (three African Americans and one Latino) living in the gay ghetto of West Hollywood.

Marcus (Seth Gilliam) is a 20-something photographer who, despite good looks and a friendly personality, has trouble finding a date. Crystal (Jazzmun), a drag queen who performs a Sister Sledge-based act, is struggling to keep her extremely contentious coterie of lip-syners from breaking up.

Hill (Dwight Ewell) catches his longtime partner making out with another guy and embarks upon a series of hot but empty one-night stands. Dante (Renoly Santiago), a spoiled rich bitch from Beverly Hills, hangs around the periphery of the group, apparently for the sole purpose of interjecting the occasional finger-snapping bon mot.

Marcus' drama-laden chance for true love arrives in the form of Darby, a music producer who moves in next door. Darby is gorgeous and sweet, but shy Marcus contents himself, as usual, with taking photographs of his crush. Darby's girlfriend (alas!) follows him from the East Coast, but Marcus immediately senses something amiss between them and wonders if he knows something about Darby that Darby doesn't know himself.

Punks is possessed of an extremely commercial nature, partially explained by the fact that it's another production from Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds. Like *Soul Food*, this is an attempt to depict unquestionably underrepresented African American lives with dignity and honesty.

But *Punks* falls short on the honesty front; the smallest African American gay role in any Spike Lee film is better drawn than all of these characters combined. Any possible cultural impact suffers from Polk's easy salving away of their social and emotional wounds. Instead of exemplifying a vibrant local color, his insertion of WeHo gay vernacular comes off as a trite panacea.

The film's questionable idealization of heterosexual masculinity as something both attainable and highly desirable and its insistence on slapping a smiley face over any subject even approaching the confrontational make *Punks* impossible to take seriously. But for the obvious and deadening good intentions of its creators, it could have worked as the hybrid sitcom/soap it so structurally resembles.

The films of Todd Solondz often are criticized as gratuitously unpleasant, sometimes to the point of perversity. But if the depictions of inexorable schoolyard hierarchy in 1995's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* and the more tortuous aspects of human sexuality in 1998's *Happiness* were uncomfortable, it wasn't necessarily because of sadism on his part but a principled lack of sentimentalized "poignancy."

With *Storytelling*, Solondz turns his unsparing eye on a gay character. The fact that suburban high school burnout Scooby Livingston's sexual experiences tend to involve his male best friend are less a problem for Scooby than for his popular younger brother, Brady, a crudely "tolerant" football star who nevertheless has a reputation he can't afford to sully with a sibling's homosexuality.

Scooby's own issues—his harried, clueless bourgeois parents (John Goodman and Julie Hagerty, both delightful),



Innocent Marcus (left) has the hots for straight boy Darby in *Punks*

his hatred of school, his desperate daydreams of becoming a television talk show host—are brought into focus by Toby Oxman, a faltering New York City filmmaker who ventures into upper-middle-class suburban New Jersey to make Scooby the star of a documentary. Toby's documentary is too noble, however, to allow for dirty, bothersome details like Scooby's sexuality and his family's casually disrespectful treatment of their maid, Consuela (the fabulous Lupe Ontiveros).

The film's who-cares take on Scooby's situation is technically gay-positive, but it's not that simple. "Gay people are human beings, too," Scooby's baby brother, Mikey, smugly admonishes at the dinner table. Later, Mikey—clearly a future "compassionate conservative"—dismisses Consuela's grief over her dead son, a criminal executed by the state, telling her "bad people should be killed" before ordering her to clean up the grape juice he has spilled on the kitchen floor.

In the world according to Todd Solondz, the road to hell is paved with glib answers to life's problems, lip-serviced good intentions, patronizing classism, detached intellectualism and sanctimonious political correctness. This is evidenced both in Scooby's story, which takes place in a section of the film titled "Nonfiction," and the shorter, more brutal "Fiction" piece preceding it.

Storytelling is painfully honest in a way that likely will be beyond the comfort zone of many an audience member. But regardless of its provocative, sometimes excruciating content, it's also quite humane—a progressive, smart, truly moral film with a refreshing lack of preaching or pretension and, even more importantly, a wicked sense of humor. **J**

CINEMA 21, 616 N.W. 21st Ave., screens *Punks* through Feb. 7 and *Storytelling* from Feb. 8 to 14. For more information call 503-223-4515.

CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN is a Portland writer and filmmaker.



Gay teen Scooby is the focus of documentary filmmakers in the darkly comic *Storytelling*