

FILM

BORSTAL BOY

Hollywood Theatre, May 17 to 23

Based (rather loosely, apparently) on the teen-age journal of Brendan Behan (Shawn Hatosy), an Irish writer who joined the Irish Republican Army before the age of 10, *Borstal Boy* begins with Behan's apprehension in 1940 by English authorities as he enters the country strapped with explosives.

After a brutal beating, he's sent to a rural "borstal" for underage offenders. He initially resists the kind, helpful overtures of the headmaster (Michael York of *Cabaret* fame) and of Charlie (Danny Dyer), a fellow inmate who is unabashedly gay. But Behan's militant nationalism undergoes complex shifts as he plots a jailbreak and finds himself developing romantic/sexual feelings toward two of the English



A home for underage juvenile delinquents is just what cute, bi Shawn Hatosy (right) needs in *Borstal Boy*

"enemy": the headmaster's daughter, Liz, sent home from Paris because of the Germans, and, to his own surprise, Charlie.

The film is engaging in its unobtrusive sequences: The boys joke irreverently with Liz

as they fix up a studio for her painting; Behan tactfully encourages a quasi-illiterate mate in a halting attempt to read; the soft-spoken prison librarian suggests Behan read the work of his fellow Irishman Oscar Wilde, and later, when pressed to fill one of the female roles in the borstal production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (an improvement over Oliver Parker's new film version), he confesses, "I always felt I was born to play a great lady."

However, if the casual interactions between characters seem loose and natural thanks to the ease of the performers, it also points out the general badness of the big moments. With the exception of a violent confrontation toward the end, they seem nothing more than empty, bombastic distractions from the movie we really want to be watching.

Obviously, most of the events depicted actually occurred in some way, but it's doubtful they happened with composer Stephen O'Connell's loud, high-strung score constantly undermining them. On-screen emotion is often more effective without music—certainly without this sort of meretricious, manipulative drivel—instructing us how to respond.

Borstal Boy is laudable for its assortment of good performances and realistic, open-ended blurring of sexual orientation. Like *Y Tu Mamá También*, it boasts a remarkable (bi)sexual sophistication. If only it also had the unflagging smarts, humor and integrity. As it stands, the

movie is intermittently enjoyable, but, as a whole, it feels like a thoroughly compromised piece of work.

—Christopher McQuinn

THE BUSINESS OF FANCYDANCING

Northwest Film Center, May 31 to June 6 (filmmaker in attendance May 31)

Let it hereby be known: Just because you are a brilliant writer does not mean you are a brilliant director.

The Business of Fancydancing is rich with promise. Loosely based on Sherman Alexie's acclaimed book of poems and short stories, it follows one Seymour Polatkin (Evan Adams), a young, gay, Indian poet who left the Spokane reservation for college and never looked back.

That is, he never went back; nearly every word he pens is about the "rez," which rather irks his old chums: "a little public relations warrior," his former best friend spouts bitterly. When Polatkin must return to the rez upon hearing of a friend's death, all his worlds collide.

With this kind of identity crisis and cross-cultural issues at the heart of your story, the possibilities for fascinating and provoking film are endless. Alexie, however, wastes the opportunity.

Somehow the writer's beautiful prose got dazed and confused when he adapted it to script and screen. The dialogue is short and choppy and laughable, and characters stand in one place delivering it to the point where you're



Evan Adams' fine acting cannot save *The Business of Fancydancing*

screaming, "Move around or something!"

Adams does his absolute best to add some heart to Polatkin, but, in the end, he's as mysterious and irksome as he is in the beginning. Fortunately, Adams can at least act, which is more than can be said of the rest of the cast.

Making the experience less excruciating is the sound quality, editing and soundtrack. Alexie wrote some of the tracks, which is not surprising. The beautiful and completely appropriate musical forms—chants, songs and poetry—fall over the scenery like a comfortable blanket. It makes you wish whoever was in charge of the sound had control over the entire production.

The nicest bits of the movie come when Polatkin reads his (Alexie's) poetry for bookstore crowds. The work is so riveting, it makes you gasp.

Do yourself a favor: Skip the film and buy the book—or any Alexie book. He's a magnificent writer, and, really, that's enough.

—Lisa Bradshaw

VIDEO REVIEWS

THE WEEKEND

Strand Releasing

New Queer Cinema was born in the early 1990s and, according to some observers, died at the end of that decade—buried under an avalanche of mediocre coming-out stories, sitcomish gender-bender comedies and sappy AIDS dramas.

Into the final category falls Brian Skeet's *The Weekend*, a mock-Chekhovian drama adapted from the novel by Peter Cameron. This maudlin mess of a film is a close-up look at a group of friends and relatives of hunky Tony (D.B. Sweeney) "relating" to each other



for two excruciating days on the one-year anniversary of his death from AIDS.

The characters are all "types" with a nobility that verges on the nauseating. They're rich and bored and *hurting*; their lives just aren't the same without Tony. (It doesn't help that in flashbacks, seen through a precious blue filter, show he wasn't even interesting, much less charismatic.)

Everybody speaks in homilies and clichés that might have worked on the printed page but sound silly on-screen. It's hard to take seriously lines like "There are things you lose you don't ever get back. You can never have them again except in the smudgy, carbon copies of memory." And you *know* how smudgy carbon copies of memory can get.

The film is awash in this kind of fake insight, which, combined with self-consciously autumnal

cinematography and lifeless performances, make for two hours of cinema that seem like, well, a weekend. Recommended only for fans of quiet suffering and Queer Cinema completists.

—Gary Morris

SPEEDWAY JUNKY

Wolfe Video

This predictable, low-rent-boy flick likely would attract a larger audience with a more accurate title—say, *My Own Private Nevada* or *Midlife Cowboy*. It's hard to fathom why executive producer Gus Van Sant backed this project.

Jesse Bradford—so adorable and likable since his breakthrough performance in 1993's *King of*



the Hill—here is reduced to nothing more than a small-town buffoon. Johnny thinks he can make it big as a race-car driver because—get this!—he's really good at playing Pole Position.

So off he goes to Las Vegas, where he connects with Eric, a gay hustler who falls for the unbelievably naive straight hick. Newcomer Jordan Brower shows promise in the film's only dynamic role.

But what little heat his character generates is doused by cliché: Jonathan Taylor Thomas (*Home Improvement*) chewing the scenery as Steven, a streetwise kingpin who shows Johnny the ropes; Daryl Hannah (*Splash*) slumming it as Eric's mother figure; and Tiffani-Amber Thiessen (*Saved by the Bell*) living up to my low expectations as a horny newlywed. All that's missing is the narcolepsy.

—Jim Radosta

Sundays Swing

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