



The luminous Flora Cross as spelling champ Eliza Naumann.

FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES 2005

Misfire

Vision quest fractures family.

BEE SEASON: Directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel. Written by Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal, based on the novel by Myla Goldberg. Produced by Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa. Executive producers Arnon Milchan, Peggy Rajski, Mark Romanek. Cinematography, Giles Nuttgens. Production design, Kelly McGehee. Editor, Lauren Zuckerman. Costume design, Mary Malin. Music by Peter Nashel. Starring Richard Gere, Juliette Binoche, Flora Cross and Max Minghella, with Kate Bosworth. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2005. PG-13. 104 minutes.

It's too bad that Richard Gere, here playing Saul Naumann, a college professor and scholar of the Jewish mysticism known as Kaballah, fails the credibility test. We just don't believe Saul is obsessed with the esoteric knowledge of God. He's too worldly, too wealthy to be an authentic seeker. He dresses in designer label clothing; lives in a spotless, elegant home in the fashionable hills of Los Angeles; drives a spiffy, little red convertible. Saul may be interested in the struggle to find meaning in everyday life, as many are, but driven crazy by it? Probably not.

When dad discovers that daughter Eliza (Flora Cross) spells difficult words perfectly the first time she hears them, he becomes a zealot, dropping his son Aaron (Max Mingella) and wife, Miriam (Juliette Binoche), like hot potatoes. Because Eliza closes her eyes to concentrate when she's spelling, Saul thinks she should prepare to experience an ecstasy few have known. He comes to this conviction through his study of the 13th century Jewish mystic, Abraham Abulafia, who created a technique for visualizing letters, which he believed led to union with God. And Saul is hell-bent on seeing that Eliza has that experience, too.

But it's not just Saul who falls headlong into marginal obsessions, the whole tight-knit Naumann family unravels. Miriam, a French Catholic girl/woman whose parents died tragically when she was young, has her own inner gods and demons. She becomes preoccupied

with making the world whole again. Teenage Aaron (Max Minghella) gets out of his head and into his body after he meets an attractive Hare Krishna devotee, Chali (Kate Bosworth). Although Max attains a trance-like state through vigorous dancing and chanting with other saffron-robed acolytes, he comes back to himself.

It's very hard to translate a religious or belief-based concept into images and sounds a commercial film audience will understand. Such beliefs may work perfectly well for individuals privately but be seen as weird by viewers who do not understand or hold the same perceived core values. At any rate, when the film visualizes letters of the alphabet swarming around Eliza's head as she thinks about the spelling of a word in a competitive national spelling bee, I checked out.

I found Miriam's spiritual project even more repugnant, because her "crime" infantilized and humiliated her. She went from being an accomplished homemaker, working scientist and good mother to an object of pity. On the other hand, her work could have been seen as art and redemptive in nature.

Sorry. I wanted to like *Bee Season* a lot more than I could. I loved the performance by the astonishing Flora Cross, whose emotions and intelligence are evident every moment she's onscreen. Likewise, Max Minghella has a refreshing lack of ego, expressed by Aaron's lack of self-consciousness as he sees his father clearly for the first time. I also enjoyed the buoyant good vibes of Kate Bosworth as Aaron's first girlfriend. But the film is too relentlessly upbeat — until it isn't. I know families fall apart, but I assume there have been clues all along, and the film does not set up those points where we wonder, "What's wrong here?"

Bee Season opens at the Bijou Wednesday, Nov. 23. **EW**

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