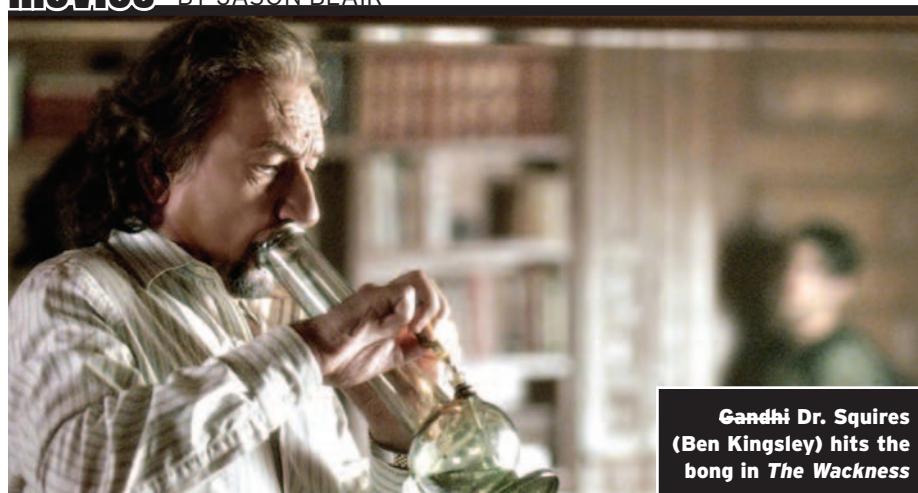




Gandhi Dr. Squires
(Ben Kingsley) hits the
bong in *The Wackness*

Hear My Cry

Coming of age in the Cobain era

THE WACKNESS: Written and directed by Jonathan Levine. Cinematography, Petra Korner. Music, David Tom. Starring Ben Kingsley, Josh Peck, Olivia Thirlby, Famke Janssen, Mary-Kate Olsen, Jane Adams and Method Man. Sony Pictures Classics, 2008. R. 110 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Putting a spin on the adage about the glass being half full, Stephanie (*Juno*'s Olivia Thirlby) says to Luke (Josh Peck), "I look at the dopeness. You just look at the wackness." In other words, lighten up. Moviegoers are forgiven if they can't isolate this expression to the milieu in which it flourished — New York during the summer of 1994 — just as we can forgive director Jonathan Levine for working too hard to recreate it. But you can hardly blame Luke for feeling a little down. Luke and Stephanie have just graduated high school. They have their entire lives ahead of them, but the overwhelming sense in *The Wackness* is that everyone is going somewhere but Luke.

While Luke's business might be flourishing — he sells weed out of an Italian ices cart — his parents are a wreck, he's likely clinically depressed and his psychiatrist is one of his biggest clients. In fact, early in *The Wackness*, you can't help wondering if Dr. Squires (Ben Kingsley) isn't in violation of the "first, do no harm" principle, so bleak are his sessions with young Luke. But gradually you realize that Luke and Squires are patches on each other's ragged sadness, each giving the other a temporary stay on the sense that it's too late to make a change. An unlikely friendship develops, resulting, somewhat expectedly, in a night in jail for both of them when Squires discovers the transgressive joys of graffiti. That doesn't leave Luke many places to turn, so there's a certain kind of sentimental defeatism at work when he seeks affection from it-girl Stephanie, who happens to be Squires' stepdaughter. When Stephanie, who should be several rungs beyond Luke's reach, says

distantly, "We'll never hang out," you can't tell whether it's her wish or lament.

That slipperiness is an example of why *The Wackness* succeeds despite its conventional material. Peck, Thirlby and Kingsley each give loose but energetic performances — Kingsley in particular seems to be improvising throughout — which allow the subtler elements of the plot to push through. The script could have been played as strictly coming-of-age material, but the sympathetic performances by the three leads allow *The Wackness* to go off in more interesting directions — a light sex comedy, for example, or a buddy picture — while not seeming too diffuse. In many ways, *The Wackness* is a companion to *Juno* in that it presents an engaging central character while maintaining the personality of a low-key ensemble film. (Famke Janssen, Jane Adams and Method Man memorably illuminate the fringes of *The Wackness*.) If Peck is at times working too hard, you can also sense a great leading-man role ahead. Likewise, Thirlby deserves a chance to carry her own film someday.

There's a sense that Levine, who directed the upcoming *All the Boys Love Mandy Lane*, has a great film in him. *The Wackness* isn't great. It's hampered by an overly filtered look that's too hazy and nostalgic for the story, while the endless references to 1994, to *Zelda* and *Game Boys* and *Zima* and mix tapes, grow tiresome fairly early. But *The Wackness* succeeds where so many others have not — *Charlie Bartlett* being a recent example — by focusing, if a little too much, on the heartbreak of experience within the loss of innocence. The audience winner at this year's Sundance Film Festival, *The Wackness* also has the strangest phone message since Jon Favreau put down the receiver in *Swingers*. If you want your sweet films to sting a little, then *The Wackness* is more dopeness than not. **EW**

The Wackness opens Friday, Aug. 1, at the Bijou.

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