



BITTER, BITTERSWEET

Nebraska is a half-sentimental, half-cynical stroll down Main Street America

NEBRASKA: Directed by Alexander Payne. Written by Bob Nelson. Cinematography, Phedon Papamichael. Editing, Kevin Tent. Music, Mark Orton. Starring Bruce Dern, Will Forte, June Squibb, Bob Odenkirk and Stacy Keach. Paramount Vantage, 2013. R. 115 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

Nebraska's black-and-white cinematography, all wide skies and one-story main streets, is a signpost, an indicator that Alexander Payne wants you to think old. Think old movies; think old men; think old-school values. But start with old men. We meet Woody Grant (Bruce Dern, with a frizz of white hair and a loping stagger of a walk) making his way onto the highway. After the Billings cops pick him up, Woody explains to his son David (Will Forte) that he was en route to Nebraska to claim a million-dollar prize. He got a letter in the mail that says he won, and goddammit, he's going to get that money, no matter how many times his

tart-tongued wife, Kate (the excellent June Squibb), and his two sons (the other, Ross, is played by Bob Odenkirk) tell him that it's all a scam.

David, whose job selling home stereos is about as fulfilling as his dying relationship with a girlfriend who just moved out, decides to take his dad to Lincoln, both because it will prove to the old man that there's no money, and because it'll mean he gets to spend some time with his fading father. These two reasons parallel the discordant tones of Payne's movie: a quietly bitter resignation, and a kindness that reaches for connection.

On the road, circumstances lead Woody and David to stop in Woody's hometown, Hawthorne, where Woody can't resist talking up his winnings. When the Grants aren't touring Woody's old stomping grounds, Woody's being hassled by family and old friends who think they

deserve part of his newfound cash. Woody's old associate Ed Pegram (Stacy Keach, oozing self-importance) threatens lawyers; David's cousins, Bart (Tim Driscoll) and Cole (Devin Ratray), indistinguishable in their nastiness, take a more direct route.

The cousins aren't characters; they're the punch line to an unfunny joke, a bit of cliché that seeps into much of the Hawthorne storyline. The men of Hawthorne are stoic and silent; the women cook and forgive their sons for their cruel streaks. Payne and his screenwriter, Bob Nelson, slip in a funny scene involving an air compressor and a warm newspaper owner, Peg Nagy (Angela McEwan), whose stories turn Woody into a real person for David. But the longer the movie lingers in Hawthorne, the more it curdles.

In a recent interview with *The New York Times*, Payne said, "A beautiful representation of the quotidian is what I think about with all the films." *Nebraska* is beautiful (thanks to cinematographer Phedon Papamichael), but the film's chilly streak makes the beauty feel imposed upon the ordinary. Payne and Nelson have all the affection in the world for David and Woody, whose story ends on a note of quiet triumph and delicate understanding. Their story veers into heartstring-tugging territory, while most everyone else in Hawthorne is subjected to something approaching social satire.

Payne is a slippery director; you can make an argument for every way of viewing *Nebraska*: as a point-and-scoff vision of small-town America; as a subtle take on what happens when the American dream doesn't work out; as generous to his characters or as cruel. And when I say "you" can make this argument, I also mean I can make this argument to myself: I can see how *Nebraska's* love of small towns includes their darker, crueller side, and at the same time I can't help but cringe at the times when Payne passes over familiarity and goes straight for something that reads like condescension. I want to keep his films at arm's length; I don't trust them not to bite, not to present an interesting character and then turn around and make him into a joke. There's something deeply cynical in Payne's work, and *Nebraska's* uneasy balance of bitter and sweet makes it feel like a Willy Vlautin novel with half the heart ripped out. ■

ARTSHOUND

Sniffing out what you shouldn't miss in the arts this week

SEE THE PAINTINGS OF HELEN LIU AT BEALL CONCERT HALL



"Whatever satisfies the soul is truth," wrote Walt Whitman in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*. By this logic, there may be no better truth than art and music, both of which will come to life in "American Luminosity: Our Poets, Our Composers, Our Art" 7:30 pm Friday, Jan. 10, at UO's Beall Concert Hall. Local artist **Helen Liu's** paintings will accompany soprano Laura Decher Wayte and pianist Nathalie Fortin's exploration of America as they perform compositions inspired by the likes of Whitman and Emily Dickinson, as well as traditional Appalachian music. For more information, visit wkly.ws/1o0.

Bask in the richness of **Steven Hillmyer's** oil, watercolor and acrylic paintings at Emerald Art Center during **Downtown Springfield Second Friday Art Walk** — don't miss the beautiful rooster with cerulean plumes. Then hit up South Willamette for the **Second Saturday Art Walk** with stops at Capella Market, Wild Birds Unlimited, Tsunami Books, O'Brien Imaging and Agate Alley's Laboratory where the psychedelic swirling landscapes and portraits of **Jordan Schaefer** will really make it feel like it's the weekend.

Calling all artists! KindTree is seeking original art for the juried **Autism Artism 2014** show to be on display at Territorial Vineyards in April. All mediums accepted — short stories, poetry, sculpture, weaving, jewelry, painting, video, audio, photographs — and must be submitted during January. Part of the show's proceeds go to artists with autism. For more info, visit wkly.ws/1o1.

Calling all Trekkies! Trek Theatre is hosting auditions 1 to 3 pm Sunday, Jan. 12, at Sam Bond's for the winter show **Measure of a Man** (based on the *Next Gen* episode of the same name) that will run March 1, 8 and 15 at Paper Moon Photo Studio.