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The Cast of 'Dear White People.' (Courtesy Liongate and Roadside Attractions)

Right Kind of Discomfort

"Dear White People" takes on privilege, identity and race

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE DARLEEN ORTEGA



When was the last time you saw a film that challenged your assumptions about identity? Or one that depicted anything like the variety and complexity of identity struggles and micro-aggressions experienced by people outside the dominant culture(s)? Or one that managed both to make you feel understood and to make you squirm?

"Dear White People," the first feature film of writer-director Justin Simien, manages all of those things and more, which is to say that it is quite an achievement. That is not to say

that it is exactly fun to watch or even wholly successful -- but even as I write that, I question whether my discomfort with some aspects of the film says more about me than it does about the film. To pitch a film at this level of complexity and to manage to sustain it there is more than most films even aspire to.

Please don't stop reading or decide that this film is not for you. It is for you. No matter who you are, "Dear White People" will repay your investment of time and discomfort, will

plant fruitful questions in your brain that deserve your attention, and will sharpen your awareness of things happening all around you. And, as I like to remind myself, what's true is true. The only question is whether you deal with it or it deals with you. And the truth will deal with you, even when the privileges you enjoy insulate you from perceiving it.

The truth in a predominantly white, Ivy League university like the fictional Win-

chester University -- like most places housing access to privilege -- is a lot more complicated than is depicted in popular culture or even popular parlance. The roving vantage points of the film involve mostly the African-American members of a mixed cast, and the variety among those characters is considerably more than we usually see in films (including in the sort of romantic comedies and romantic thrillers that seem to predominate among the few films with majority-black casts). Chief among the characters here is Sam, whose campus radio program shares the movie's title and who dispenses pitiless jibes at the hypocrisies and micro-aggressions that African-Americans experience in their daily interactions with clueless Caucasians. ("Dear White People, stop touching our hair. Does this look like a petting zoo to you?") Sam's perceptions are sharp

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