

Film Review

palindromes



Todd Solondz. *Palindromes*. Extra Large Pictures (starring Ellen Barkin and Matthew Faber), 2004.

Reviewed by R. Colin Tait

While there are many issues which divide Americans, there is none more polarizing than abortion. Todd Solondz's awareness of this fact makes for his most insightful and most uncomfortable movie to date.

In *Palindromes*, Solondz presents us with Aviva, a girl whose name (and story) can be reversed to produce the exact same result. Consisting of an episodic structure, the film is similar to Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), where the female lead is portrayed by several actresses, except here Aviva is played by a multiracial cast (ranging through several different types of women, including a large black woman for the central part of the film, Jennifer Jason Leigh at the ending, and a little boy along the way). What this accomplishes is an unnerving destabilization within the construction of the film, as *Palindromes* confronts the fabric of American life with nothing but stark reality.

From the first scene, the audience is presented with a shaky recording of a funeral. Here, we are informed that the deceased recently took her life when faced with the prospect of having a baby. This scene, rendered in caustic, Solondz-style, complete with a canned performance from a mediocre piano concerto reminds the viewer of one of the filmmakers favorite targets - the satiric depiction of the American middle class. When talking to her mother about her cousin's death, Aviva informs us that all she wants to do is get pregnant so that she will have nothing but love in her life forever. We know from the beginning that her goal will tread the delicate line between love and sex (sex being the necessary act for getting the kind of love that she wants to fill her life). When she has sex and is subsequently impregnated by a family friend's son, her parents force her to have an abortion so that she will conform to the status quo of her suburban neighborhood. Here, the film examines one extreme of the issue and the negative aspects of the completely liberal, secular view of abortion. This brutal depiction particularly hits home when the heartbreaking announcement comes that only the audience and Aviva's parents are privy to - the fact that during the abortion, an emergency hysterectomy was performed to save her life.

Aviva, deprived of this knowledge by her parents, runs away in order to find the love and happiness that she still believes only a child of her own can provide her. As a result, Aviva's encounter with the truck driver Earl is all

the more disturbing, particularly when the pre-teen perception of love is countered with the harsh realities of adult desires for sex. When Earl abandons her in a truck stop in the middle of nowhere, her quest continues, and eventually leads her to the American Heartland. When Aviva finds refuge in the arms of Momma Sunshine and her family of orphans that she adopted from around the globe, she encounters the extreme fringe of the religious far right, led by the enigmatic Doctor Dan, and his secret organization that employs born-again ex-cons to assassinate abortion doctors. Meanwhile, Aviva becomes part of the family, joining the dance band of "rejected children" whose repeated appearances on *The 700 Club* serve the political pro-life cause to assert their value as members of society, despite their various afflictions. When Aviva is rejected from the family for her (inadvertent) sexual proclivities, the film comes full-circle, and Aviva's adventure comes to a climax in a parodied version of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Finally, the film finds closure where it began, and continues the cycle in the suburban climate of her former life.

What the film deftly manages is the typically 'Solondzian' equal treatment of both sides of the issue. In this manner, the film shares content with Alexander Payne's sophomore effort *Citizen Ruth* (1996) which follows the equally empty sign of the pregnant woman (played with glue-sniffing excellence by Laura Dern) who finds herself in the center of the larger debate about the fate of her unborn child. Where *Palindromes* excels is in its rendering of the arguments in all their brutality - something Solondz had skillfully demonstrated in *Storytelling* (2001), *Happiness* (1998), and *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995). This film's strength, and Solondz's skill as a filmmaker, is in his presentation of the futility and circularity of the debate (and indeed the very violence of both extremes of the respective religious and secular positions) at the level of form, not only by casting seven actresses to portray the prepubescent Aviva, but also by linking the form of the film to its content. Thus, it returns to the very position that it began by bringing Aviva home, but having changed the perspective by examining the very limits of the abortion issue. Finally, this film reveals Solondz at his misanthropic best, where the film's palindrome structure (where the beginning and the end are the same) spares no target and in fact, only reveals the inherent hypocrisy of both religious and secular beliefs. ☺