

# Do nostalgia and serious purpose mix?

## Liberty Heights, written and directed by Barry Levinson

By Andrea Peters  
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Barry Levinson's *Liberty Heights* is, from one point of view, an ambitious and legitimate undertaking. Anti-Semitism, racial divisions and discrimination permeate the world of a middle class high school student from a Jewish neighborhood in Baltimore in Levinson's new film, the fourth he has made about his hometown (*Diner, Tin Men, Avalon*).

Although Levinson set the film in 1954, the director's motive for making a film touching on major historical and social themes, including school desegregation, McCarthyism and class distinction, is largely contemporary. He has said that a number of recent events, including the brutal deaths of James Byrd in Texas and Matthew Shepard in Wyoming, as well as an incident in which a critic referred to a character in one of his films as having Jewish attributes, sensitized him to the continuing existence of prejudice and intolerance of various kinds.

While the problems Levinson addresses are potentially explosive, it is perhaps significant that the end result of his effort is a film that conveys a mood of gentle nostalgia. A sympathetic, and at times heartfelt work, *Liberty Heights* stumbles and finally fails to depict a complex era with the necessary breadth and sophistication. Because of this limitation the movie is unable to speak to the connection between the tensions affecting the main character, Ben Kurtzman (Ben Foster), in the mid 1950s and the general environment today—i.e., what at least in part brought Levinson to make the film in the first place.

A point of tension within both families, Ben's pursuit of a relationship with an attractive black girl from his high school, Sylvia (Rebekah Johnson), becomes the focal point of his role in the film. Introducing him to rock n' roll and the wild performances of James Brown, the connection with Sylvia draws him into a cultural

world beyond Baltimore's Jewish community. While that relationship is developing, Ben's older brother, Van, becomes smitten with a wealthy gentile, Dubbie (Caroline Murphy). His drawn-out attempts to have a relationship, in the end, come to nothing when Dubbie succumbs to a drunken emotional breakdown while in a motel room with him.

Meanwhile Ben and Van's father, Nate (Joe Mantegna), a Jewish businessman running a failing burlesque theater and a numbers racket, encounters money problems, eventually ending up in trouble with the law. The Kurtzman household is the place in which all these story lines intersect. Ada (Bebe Neuwirth) is a loyal wife and mother, ever attentive to her children and faithfully supporting her husband. "Buba," (Yiddish for grandma) with an indistinct Eastern European accent, fits the bill for the Jewish grandmother.

Levinson's treatment of some of the relationships, evolving in the context of highly charged social circumstances, reveals a genuine sensitivity to the nuances of youthful infatuation—particularly the relationship between Ben and Sylvia. Unfortunately, the simplified manner in which the director approaches many aspects of life and art renders many of the intense situations, and the social and psychological processes that lie behind them, somewhat benign.

Dramatic confrontations that crop up, such as Ben's dressing up as Hitler for Halloween, grab one's attention. But how these moments are dealt with—slightingly and shallowly—is frustrating for the spectator. In the Halloween scene, Ben's mother forbids him to go out and his grandmother is noticeably upset, but not much more is made of the incident. And the willingness of the film simply to ascribe his act to the "ignorance of youth" seems inadequate.

Furthermore, Ben's personal transformation is difficult to understand because of the film's tendency to look for the easy way out. The scene at the beginning of the movie in which Ben peers through the steel gates of a private pool bearing the sign "No Jews, No Dogs, No Coloreds," starkly expresses something about the reality of the 1950s in the US. Ben and his friends are obviously disturbed by the sign, but their reaction seems inappropriately lighthearted.

This is not necessarily a poor choice on the director's part in and of itself, but it establishes a pattern that recurs throughout the film. The final scene in which the same three boys enter the pool with "JEW" written in large letters on their chests, while it provides the film with a certain cohesiveness, seems to jar with the characters' overall development. The denouement seems contrived, because there is no explanation offered as to how this teenager goes from wearing a Nazi outfit on Halloween to painting his body with red ink and engaging in a very public and aggressive protest against discrimination.

Demonstrated here is the general problem the film has in developing in a serious and textured manner the complex issues that it chooses to introduce. When Van refuses to swear on the bible during a trial and is met with cries of "Pinko" and "You're a communist," this seems an honest and well-intentioned attempt to present the visceral anticommunism that pervaded the McCarthyite period.

However, in the end, the scene acknowledges the issue only in order to dismiss it or give it short shrift. Although Van's action causes an uproar in the courtroom, the judge rules that the matter will not be pursued and simply dismisses the witness. Van and his friends hadn't viewed his refusal to take the oath as an act of political opposition, merely as a lark, and leave the court unfazed and even pleased that the stunt he pulled was able to help the wealthy youth on trial. The scene, which seems quite contrived to begin with, simply fizzles out. The net result: since this is the most outright expression of McCarthyism in the film, the ease with which the eruption is handled tends to encourage a complacent attitude toward a dangerous and destructive political ideology.

A similar sort of problem arises in the scene in which a drug dealer, Little Melvin (Orlando Jones), to whom Ben's father owes money, kidnaps Ben, Sylvia and two

friends. Little Melvin is portrayed as a tough-talking, although naive and rather harmless figure throughout the film. His new role as a gun-pointing kidnapper making sexual taunts aimed at Ben and Sylvia seems out of place and difficult to take seriously. The argument between Ben and Little Melvin about the Jews' history as slaves in Egypt does little to lend seriousness to the moment.

In constructing the characters Levinson relies on a healthy dosage of cliché. The film is assisted in arriving at simple answers by the fact that the characters are too simple themselves. The wealthy gentile comes to an outdoor party riding on a horse. Little Melvin swaggers. Ben and Van's "Buba" listens in on phone conversations.

In general one could say that the characters in the film move *in* and *through* the historical period in which the events of the film are laid, without every deeply interacting with it or breaking through its surface. Instead of a more serious examination of the era, the film becomes too much of a pleasant trip down memory lane.

This is unfortunate. Levinson is an intelligent and artistically gifted man. He has provided lively entertainment and even some inspired moments. Like so many other well-meaning liberals, however, who are fundamentally comfortable with their lives, he perhaps finds it difficult to rouse himself to a state of genuine passion when considering the social problems of 1954, much less consider their implications in 1999.

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