

Only elements of a critique

The Anniversary Party, written and directed by Jennifer Jason Leigh and Alan Cumming

By Joanne Laurier
13 July 2001

In *The Anniversary Party*, Jennifer Jason Leigh and Alan Cumming, two well-known film actors, have co-written and co-directed a work that satirizes certain aspects of the Hollywood lifestyle. Filmed on a low budget in a 19-day shoot, the movie is a sincere but ultimately inadequate look at the film industry's narcissism and moral confusion.

Sally (Leigh), a movie actress insecure about her age, marriage and career, and Joe (Cumming), a British novelist who has been given a green light to direct a first film based on one of his novels, are throwing a party to celebrate their sixth wedding anniversary. After a separation of a year, they've been back together for a few months. They are now trying, with a certain amount of desperation, to have a child.

Their chic, glass-walled, designer house with pool is being readied for the occasion by two Hispanic maids, while Joe and Sally engage in a yoga session. Guests call wondering whether their dogs are welcome. An ascendant star (Gwyneth Paltrow) newly cast in Joe's movie has been invited by Joe. Sally is jealous—it should have been her role, although she is at least a decade too old for the part.

The party's hip crowd includes the director of Sally's current film and his anorexic wife, an actress, who having just given birth is plying herself with diet pills and other substances; the couple's business manager and his insensitive wife; a photographer and very close confidante of Joe's; a former male lover of his; and the troublesome couple next door, with whom Sally and Joe have been feuding.

A more stable element in the volatile mix is aging leading man (Kevin Kline), his actress turned wife and mother (Phoebe Cates) and their two apparently

well-loved and well-adjusted children (the couple's real life children).

The atmosphere is tense and murky thanks to the guests' preoccupation with the most superficial concerns. This unstable environment threatens to get out of hand when the drug Ecstasy is passed around. Presumably some hidden, or repressed, truths emerge.

Sally's director (who nearly drowns under the drug's influence) reveals that her performance in the yet-to-be-edited comedy is funereal, endangering the entire project; Joe has grossly neglected his family in England and the night of the party his sister dies of a drug overdose; the ex-actress, happy-mom denounces motherhood and Sally, having apparently feigned a desire to have a child, admits that she recently had an abortion behind Joe's back.

The film's main target seems to be a self-absorbed milieu which finds a slavish animal a joy but children too invasive and demanding. Dogs loom large in this world. Sally and Joe have worked out in advance that no one will be allowed to bring his or her dog for fear that the party will be overrun by pampered pets. Sally's business manager prompted the couple to invite neighbors with whom the only previous interaction has been a dispute over dog problems.

Leigh, an actress identified with the exploration of darker personalities, and Cumming are attempting to examine critically both a lifestyle and themselves as part of the problem. It is a film about artists and their entourage who consider themselves "independent" and on the "cutting edge." All the performers have obviously incorporated elements and concerns from their own lives in a relatively candid and truthful manner.

The film's promising beginning depicts the interruption of the yoga session. Joe gets annoyed when the two maids, heavily burdened with bags of party food, break up the spiritual atmosphere of Joe and Sally's poolside exercise, complete with personal trainer. Throughout the movie the maids serve and clean, more like background color than real people, although they are obviously longtime employees of the couple.

There are a number of nice touches. The party's finale after dawn sees bleary-eyed guests comforting Joe for the loss of his sister. Even at this moment there is bickering over hierarchical rank (who is most important to Joe). In any event, the mood ends abruptly when Joe and Sally are presented with their tax returns to sign.

The film's characters are so inwardly focused that they only rarely emerge from a neurotic bubble. Relationships take place within a network of people who, as one reviewer put it, are like onions—"peeling away the layers doesn't yield any center, just more layers." Leigh and Cumming are film industry veterans who know this world well. Certain moments of *The Anniversary Party* ring true and, at its best, the film has an edge to it.

Despite these positive features, the film is essentially unsatisfying. In the first place it must be said that overall the movie's criticisms are pretty mild, bearing in mind that it is the product of people who consider themselves Hollywood outsiders, or at least a more enlightened industry breed. What is it that they are criticizing? A few character flaws and excesses! But is the real problem that artists are so self-absorbed that they prefer the company of animals to the responsibility of children? Or that the artistic model should be the well adjusted family unit (Kline, Cates)?

Leigh, in an interview with CNN, offers a glimpse of the thinking that so severely limits the film: "Leigh says she wanted to present a new version of Hollywood glamour—an authentic one... 'You come in with these expectations and ideas and judgment and theories about these (famous) people and as it wears down and the veneers wear off, you realize, Oh, they're struggling too, you know? They may have the perfect house and have a lot of success and everything, but they still have issues.'"

Leigh's insider view may be interesting, but what the

film lacks is any reference to the ideas of its characters, or to the state of the world. Why are their lives all sound and fury signifying almost nothing? The filmmakers are intelligent, sensitive people with relatively little to say. *The Anniversary Party* looks at the more superficial aspects of the industry, its externals, without looking at the generally weak and stagnant state of contemporary filmmaking.

This helps explain the inconsistencies in tone and mood. It's not simply that the film veers from comedy to melodrama, but that also within certain individual scenes the actors seem to be playing in different modes. A clear example of this sort of inconsistency occurs in the scene in which various guests toast the couple—some toasts are warm and friendly, some are abrasive and others are merely eccentric. It's not at all clear what the scene is intended to show.

Leigh and Cumming are somewhat disgruntled members of the Hollywood scene who have not deeply worked out a critique. The film lacks sufficient anger at the current state of affairs and, more generally, a strong purposefulness.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>