

# Acting is not the problem

crazy/beautiful, written by Phil Hay and Matt Manfredi, directed by John Stockwell

By David Walsh  
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There are numerous indications that the current woeful state of filmmaking is not an inevitable state of affairs, that it is, in essence, an historical and intellectual problem. One of those is the level of technological innovation applied at every stage in the physical production of a film. Specialists in the field now possess the ability to create a convincing version of virtually any image the human mind can dream up, as well as to combine and manipulate such images. We are undoubtedly on the threshold of extraordinary artistic breakthroughs made possible in part by technology.

Another, more immediately human indication is the presence of remarkable performers in works that often are hardly or only partially worthy of them.

Despite everything, the quality of acting in contemporary films remains quite high. The performers are rarely the problem in a given work. Even in the case of individuals who are so highly paid and over-promoted that their relationship to reality must be problematic at best, the spectator often feels that genuine talent lurks beneath the publicity image—although it is difficult to tell when so many roles are undemanding and pointless.

Every filmgoer must be aware that it is possible for the gifted performer, bringing to bear his or her artistic intuition, to create remarkable *individual* moments. This capability is enhanced by the character of filmmaking, which chops up dialogue and action into pieces lasting a few seconds or, generally, at most a few minutes. A performance in a 90-minute or two-hour work may be filmed over a period of days, weeks, even months.

The ability to imitate behavior and reproduce its truth in discrete bits does not, unfortunately, guarantee or by itself generate a larger vision. To connect the distinct moments and convert them into a coherent whole, to create an internally consistent portrait of a personality or social milieu—these are more difficult tasks, requiring knowledge and conscious understanding of social and psychological processes, and seldom undertaken at present.

(In the theater, it is more difficult to disguise the absence of a unifying, guiding idea. This may be one of the reasons why most theater acting seems so provincial and mediocre at

present. Its performers are called on to do the next to impossible, to render coherent and urgent the musings of relatively negligible writers.)

The enormous amounts paid to certain film performers help produce a chasm between the latter and the general public and within the film industry itself. However, there are countervailing, “democratizing” tendencies at work in cinema as well. Actors are not, at least for the most part, simply machines for the production of studio profits or the accumulation of personal wealth. Many have the desire to do serious work. There is an active response whenever such opportunities arise or perhaps merely appear to arise—sometimes actors are fooled, sometimes they fool themselves about the projects they take on. But there is an obvious willingness, even among the most sought after and pampered, to do what is perceived to be ambitious, innovative and independent.

*crazy/beautiful* is not an especially remarkable film, but it boasts several fine performers, including most prominently Kirsten Dunst and Bruce Davison.

The film tells the story of a troubled, well-to-do girl, Nicole (Dunst)—the daughter of a liberal Los Angeles congressman (Davison)—who takes up with a Latino boy, Carlos (Jay Hernandez), a star athlete and academic achiever. The girl’s mother, we learn, has committed suicide and Nicole is spinning out of control. She drinks, does drugs, parties, cuts school, gets into trouble. Her father, at the end of his wits, urges Carlos, for the latter’s own sake, to stay away from the girl. For their part, Carlos’s family members are concerned that his future, upon which so much seems to depend, will be disrupted by Nicole’s disturbing presence.

There are appealing elements in *crazy/beautiful*. The opening credit sequence, during which Carlos makes his way by bus from his inner city home to a high school in a privileged, oceanside community, reveals more about social realities in the US than most American films in their entirety. In general, the shots of houses and streets and neighborhoods suggest that the filmmakers have tried to look at certain things honestly.

Director John Stockwell, a former actor, draws sensitive

performances from most of his cast, including Hernandez, in his film debut, Soledad St. Hilaire as Carlos's mother and Taryn Manning as Nicole's best friend and partner in crime.

Dunst and Davison are remarkable as father and daughter, introducing a great deal of empathy to their characters' dilemmas. Davison's character is something of a film industry fantasy. There are no such uncorrupted, genuinely socially conscious political figures sitting in the US Congress. Nonetheless, there are conscientious liberals around, and Davison (perhaps most memorable in Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*) captures something essential about this type at its best, so to speak. Beyond that, he unimpeachably presents the situation of a heartbroken father, a man who sees his daughter's life going down the drain and feels powerless to prevent it. He is a fine actor.

Dunst has an extraordinary ability to express emotion. It is not entirely clear to me why and how certain actors serve as emotional mediums; they are not always the most articulate or even perceptive individuals outside their chosen profession, but we are fortunate they exist. They perform a social function for the rest of us. They are not always so fortunate. We live in a society where many individuals hunger for a sympathetic face, even (or perhaps especially) if it is only composed of colored lights beamed onto a large screen. Film performers who demonstrate this sort of sensitivity sometimes find it a curse as they may become the focus of a great deal of socially-based desperation.

In any event, Dunst brings more truth to her roles at 18 or 19 than virtually any contemporary American actress I can think of. As the tortured, self-destructive Nicole, she registers self-doubt, tentativeness, eternal expectation of the worst—also bravery, vulnerability, desire. Her face reminds one of the line from André Breton about the woman "with her eyes of forests forever beneath the axe." Although the script, even at its best, does not give her everything she needs, Dunst brings something genuinely pained to a number of critical moments, for example, when she realizes her own father has advised the person she loves to break with her.

In the end, Dunst, Davison and the rest of the cast are defeated by the film's script and overall conception. As is almost universally the case these days in American cinema, the screenwriters find it necessary to simplify and sanitize reality.

One of the most disappointing features of *crazy/beautiful* is the manner in which the writers seek to account for Nicole's unhappiness. They cannot, so to speak, leave well enough alone. We see her in the film's opening sequences in her environment, a wealthy girl in a socially and ethnically divided city. Her father has a public existence that is obviously alien to her; he has a new wife who appears rather opportunistic and cold. Nicole is sensitive in an insensitive world. The screenwriters feel obliged, however, to introduce the arbitrary and unconvincing fact of her mother's suicide. There must be a single event, a trauma that explains everything. They don't

seem to feel, although Dunst's performance suggests it, that the state of her world is enough to produce Nicole's distress. Their intervention materially weakens the film, renders it that much more harmless.

The star-crossed lovers' theme is hardly new, even with the switch in this film: the rich kid as the troublemaker. But the film has more serious problems than that. The happy and complacent resolution to the potentially tragic events, brought about apparently by a couple of five-minute heart-to-heart conversations, should satisfy no one. The anguish of Dunst's character, for one thing, is far too deep and all-encompassing to be contained and dissolved so easily. This is another way of saying that such feelings are inevitably associated, at one level or another, with more general, social suffering. Someone who hurts that much is hurting for more than simply herself. The film's ending is just wishful thinking.

Unhappily, the essential conformism and political cowardice of the film's creators comes out in their treatment of Carlos and his career choice. His burning desire is to attend the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland and become a navy pilot. Of course young people with such ambitions exist, although whether they possess his sensitivity and principles is another question. But, in any case, the filmmakers' calculations are clear. The liberal congressman, with a vaguely radical history, has to be balanced with a patriotic teenager, in fact, the congressman has to demonstrate his own patriotic credentials. The final shot of the film catches Carlos as a pilot presumably, with an American flag patch on his shoulder. Instinctively and inevitably, the writers and director feel the need to reassure us that they are not critics of American society and discourage our drawing any wider conclusions from the trauma the film itself has introduced.

One leaves the movie theater hoping that the finest contemporary performers find films that are worthy of them.

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