



## **ART SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL**

I've read critics who have described Terry Zwigoff's *Art School Confidential* as nihilistic, sour, and mean-spirited. They're saying it like that's a

*bad*

thing. Working with screenwriter Daniel Clowes – adapting the film from his comic book, and again collaborating with the director who helmed 2001's Clowes-scripted

*Ghost World*

– Zwigoff has, here, fashioned a

*wonderfully*

nihilistic, sour, and mean-spirited comedy; it might take easy potshots at the politics and posturings of the art community, but those potshots are funny and clever, and the film's refusal to sentimentalize any of its characters (even our protagonist) is incredibly refreshing. Still, the movie has been met with much dissatisfaction, if not outright annoyance.

*Art School Confidential*

seems, to me, the most thoroughly misunderstood movie of the year.

Zwigoff's film centers around freshman art student Jerome Platz (Max Minghella), whose earnest attempts to become "the greatest artist of the 21st Century" are constantly thwarted by a group of monstrously self-involved students, eccentric instructors, and his own insecurities. What a number of reviewers appear to be taking offense at is the treatment Jerome receives through the course of the movie – everyone in *Art School Confidential*, even his beautiful, funky muse (Sophia Myles), makes his life hell, and by the time Jerome finds himself entwined in a series of campus serial killings, the film's comedic cruelty increases exponentially. Yet these critics' chief complaint – that the film is a nasty, one-note barrage of insults directed against a sweet, misunderstood art student – only holds water if you think Jerome

*is*

a sweet, misunderstood art student. But I think Zwigoff and Clowes, even from

*Art School Confidential*

's first scene, are telling us otherwise.

During the opening credits, a younger, grade-school Jerome is seen getting punched in the face, repeatedly, by a bully. It's a shrewd way to get you on this kid's side from moment one; Jerome, even from an early age, is perceived as a victim, and when he *continues* to be victimized throughout

*Confidential*

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 17 May 2006 02:25

---

, it's easy to see how the film itself could be seen as hateful. But the way the prepubescent Jerome

*takes*

his schoolyard beatings is what's fascinating. Jerome's expression registers nothing – not anger, not humiliation, not even pain. He's completely passive, taking abuse as a matter of course – it's what he must endure in the name of Art.

The thrill of *Art School Confidential* is that Zwigoff and Clowes reveal Jerome's passivity – his martyrdom – as every bit as ridiculous as the peculiarities of the peers and teachers he detests. Jerome isn't shown to possess any great talent; his works appear perfectly competent, if unspectacular. But the sly joke of the movie is that Jerome is presented as someone who feels *entitled*

to great success (and girls), yet someone whose willingness to figuratively and *literally*

get beaten up by others takes an unexpected turn. Through the course of the movie, the continual grievances that have plagued him begin to drive Jerome a little mad, and the film's attacks on him stop feeling cruel; we start to realize that, in this particular art world, Jerome's "sanity" might just make him the biggest loon of all, and Jerome's comic anguish begins to feel more like just desserts.

It's not often that a movie asks its audience to so thoroughly switch its allegiances toward a central character, but it's a testament to the originality and skill of Zwigoff and Clowes (and the terrific Minghella) that *Art School Confidential* gets more assured and subversively hysterical as it progresses – there's a wickedly smart inevitability to the plotting; it's

*film noir*

with art-school poseurs. The film has more than its share of laugh-out-loud moments involving the pretensions of Jerome's art-school associates – Ethan Suplee is enjoyably obnoxious as a god-awful wannabe director, and John Malkovich does a great light-comic turn as one of Jerome's mentors. And Zwigoff throws in some delirious details, such as the way Jerome's parents hug with relief at their son's mention of a girlfriend – their embrace, seen through a swinging kitchen door, is a great piece of staging – and the word-weary dourness of Jerome's obviously gay roommate, who sighs, "I

*totally*

miss my girlfriend." Yet it's the film's complete lack of sentimentality that, in the end, makes it so memorable.

*Art School Confidential*

is pointed, and rude, and more than a little vicious. Just right for a comedic flaying of the artistic temperament.



## AND FIVE OTHERS ...

• **Poseidon:** At roughly the 15-minute mark, when the titular ship turns upside down, we seem barely to have been introduced to the film's cast of potential heroes and victims; about a half-hour's worth of obligatory exposition seems to be missing. But based on the stoic, unintentionally hilarious dialogue and embarrassingly lazy acting that ensues, that's actually a blessing. The effects are fine, if unsurprising, but Wolfgang Petersen's waterlogged opus suffers from a fatal lack of personality; the film has a ream of do-or-die moments, but you know a disaster flick is in deep trouble when you don't necessarily want any of its characters to *live*.

• **An American Haunting:** There are a couple of early jolts in this borderline incoherent 19th Century ghost story, but only one moment that'll really give you the shivers – when Sissy Spacek, terrified by the ungodly goings-on in her Tennessee home, pops her eyes like Carrie White at the end of the prom, and cuts through the movie's silliness with a ferocious gaze that suggests more scintillating scares than any the movie actually provides.



• **Akeelah & the Bee:** The kind of feel-good, sentimental pap that is usually tagged as "inspiring," and it actually *did* inspire me – to immediately return to 1993's *Searching for Bobby Fischer* and watch the same movie being pulled off *skillfully*.

. Despite the goodwill attached to it, nothing in the doggedly cutesy spelling-bee drama plays as anything but phony; the performers (including Laurence Fishburne and Angela Bassett) are pitched way too high, and the dialogue is movie-of-the-week banal. God help me, I think even *Bee Season* was less draining than this.

• **Hoot:** Just like Disney's *Holes*. Except, you know, freaking *terrible*.

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 17 May 2006 02:25

---



• **RV:** He may have completely forgotten how to pace a comedy – there are unfunny routines here that go on so long I started *wincing* – but credit director Barry Sonnenfeld for at least appreciating comic talent; Cheryl Hines, Kristin Chenoweth, and Will Arnett (briefly reunited here with *Arrested Development's* Tony Hale!) provide their dopey material with some fresh curlicues, and Jeff Daniels achieves bumpkin perfection with his heartsick reading of "I am filled with chagrin." (It's a moment worthy of a Coen brothers hayseed farce.) Nearly *everyone* in this tired slapstick is a welcome presence except lead Robin Williams, who finds himself working at a low ebb as a comic performer; at one point, Williams' on-screen daughter, regarding another of his asinine "inspirations," asks of her father, "Is he being funny? 'Cause I can never tell." These days, neither can I.