

Nothing to say, badly said

Novocaine, written and directed by David Atkins
Sidewalks of New York, written and directed by Edward Burns

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These are essentially pointless and witless films about which it is no great pleasure to write. They have little to say and say that badly.

In *Novocaine* Steve Martin plays Frank Sangster, a dentist in the Midwest, a middle class citizen of the most conventional sort. He becomes involved with a woman who steals narcotics and subsequently her brother who sells them. The film goes from one implausibility to another. Sangster ends up stabbing the psychotic brother in the hand with a knife and escaping from police across the rooftop of a motel.

It would be an excellent idea if the term *film noir* were banned from cinema language for a specified period of time and if aspiring filmmakers were forbidden to see films from the late 1940s and 1950s. They derive entirely incorrect ideas from the latter. The point has been made before, but apparently it needs repeating. The dentist or bank clerk in 1948 had lived through the Depression and very probably participated in World War II. For better or worse, he had been through powerful events, known hardship, perhaps carried a gun in combat.

The middle class citizen in 2001 has a different history. Titanic events may lie ahead, but not immediately behind. A real-life Sangster would have called the authorities and had done with it twenty minutes into the film. Nothing that follows is believable or appealing.

Writer/director David Atkins' principal claim to fame is that he wrote the screenplay for Emir Kusturica's only English-language film, *Arizona Dream* (1993). On the basis of a viewing of this new film, the connection with Kusturica, a talented if eccentric filmmaker, seems largely accidental. The beginning, middle and end are foolish. The timing is off, the entire work feels amateurish.

The director cannot seem to make up his mind about anything. At moments the film is a send-up with its tongue firmly planted in its cheek, at others we are

apparently to take the melodrama at face value. There are snide bits of satire, mostly concerned with the gauche habits of the suburban middle class. There is, however, far more hope for humanity in the gaucheest of suburbanites than in this hapless effort.

The personalities in the film are not the chief problem. Laura Dern and Helena Bonham Carter are always worth watching. But they are given little that is meaningful to do. The romantic moments between Martin and Carter are resolutely without chemistry and the heavy-handedness of Dern's final speech, justifying her villainy, would have made a Hollywood screenwriter of another day blush with shame.

The film begins with a series of X-rays. With X-ray technology a radiologist is permitted to see beneath the skin of a human being. *Novocaine*, unhappily, lives entirely on the surface. And even its little bit of skin is unconvincing.

Edward Burns' *Sidewalks of New York*, in its own peculiar way, is perhaps an even less sympathetic piece of work.

It revolves around a few couples or would-be couples in contemporary Manhattan: Tommy (Burns)—an assistant on some piece of tabloid television programming, hosted by a slimy lowlife (Dennis Farina)—encounters an elementary school teacher, Maria (Rosario Dawson), and they begin to see each other; a young woman from Iowa, Ashley (Brittany Murphy), conducting an affair with a married dentist, Griffin (Stanley Tucci), is being pursued by Maria's old husband, Ben (David Krumholtz); the dentist is married to a real estate broker, Annie (Heather Graham), who happens to start showing Tommy apartments.

Again, the film combines the implausible with the superficial. It is thoroughly unbelievable that Maria and Ben were ever a couple; why Griffin would tire of the

glamorous Annie after only a few years of marriage is never explained; one can only wonder how Tommy manages to be so deeply sensitive while working in such a corrupt atmosphere. Etc.

The triviality of these people and their lives is staggering. It's difficult to recall a single moment of insight into any significant social or psychological process. And we are forced to listen to them prate on for nearly two hours.

Burns (*The Brothers McMullen* [1995], *She's the One* [1996]) manages to be both vulgar and conformist at the same time. The discussion of the characters' sexual goings-on is distasteful, but Burns, after titillating, turns the work into an argument for fidelity and monogamy. The philandering dentist is a caricature, doomed, of course, to end up unhappy and alone. Young love, impossibly "cute," triumphs. It's really dreadful.

And these films fall more or less into the category of "independent" works! Again, one is obliged to ask: independent of what? There is no substantial sense in which either of these films flows against the conventional stream.

As the US and the entire world plunge into uncharted territory, with the promise of vast upheaval, the extraordinary backwardness and irrelevance of a large section of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia makes itself felt with greater and greater force. Precisely that section of the population which considers itself the cleverest and brightest spot in the known universe. People, in other words, who understand nothing about their society or themselves. The truth is that it simply doesn't matter for the most part what they do. Their ideas are not interesting, their psychology is not interesting, their sexuality is not interesting, and their art is not interesting.



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