

# Larger mysteries left unsolved

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*Where the Truth Lies*, written and directed by Atom Egoyan, based on the novel by Rupert Holmes

The most recent work by Armenian-Canadian independent film director Atom Egoyan (*Exotica*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Ararat*), the neo-film noir *Where the Truth Lies*, is apparently an attempt at a more commercial brand of cinema aimed at gaining a wider audience.

A legendary show business team of the 1950s (*à la* Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis), Vince Collins and Lanny Morris (Colin Firth and Kevin Bacon), combine a rather sleazy nightclub act with the hosting of an annual polio telethon. Vince is the audience-soothing straight man to Lanny's goofy slapstick. Their partnership extends beyond the stage in the sharing of booze, drugs and women. And violence. When an audience member, annoyed with Lanny's sexual overtures to his date, retaliates with an anti-Semitic epithet, Vince lures him backstage for a violent pummeling. Inseparable, Collins and Morris are almost as much a couple as they are an act.

The pair is the favorite of Mafioso nightclub owner Sally San Marco (Maury Chaykin). When a college student moonlighting as a waitress turns up dead in the bathtub of Vince and Lanny's hotel suite—the result of Sally's largesse—the duo breaks up. Although they are cleared of any wrongdoing, the scandal, along with their now obvious mob connection, irrevocably alters their public image. Other secrets as well prevent the relationship from carrying on.

Fifteen years later, an ambitious young reporter, Karen (Alison Lohman)—who, as a polio-stricken child, was featured on one of the Collins/Morris telethons—now seeks to solve the mystery of the murder, to uncover what celebrity and money have buried. The truth-excavating twists—including sex with Lanny, kinky sex arranged by Vince—come to an abrupt halt when the whodunit ends with a cliché that is nearly provocative in its obviousness.

Adapted from the novel by Rupert Holmes, *Where the Truth Lies*, purports to investigate, according to the film's production notes, the paradoxical nature of show business—"at once highly visible yet highly insular, full of extreme beauty and extreme ugliness."

This duality, according to Egoyan, forms the essence of

audience attraction, a combination of hero and devil worship. It is the supra-humanness of the icon/star that captivates. Not exactly an earthshaking insight unless one is prepared to explore the reasons why people need a vicarious existence, a fantasy world. The thought that this unhappy aspect of present-day life has its roots in an intensely alienating society seems to hold no interest for Egoyan.

Then there is the nature of the relationship between Vince and Lanny. In an interview, Egoyan states that he wanted to resurrect the dynamism of the Hollywood comedy team. "It's a part of our culture that has faded away. There was this Freudian construction about it regarding 'ego' and 'id.' There's always this person who's impulsive and who has unleashed another character that tries to civilize them. It's a recurrent theme," says the director.

Rather than settling for a few cursory truisms, a filmmaker seriously undertaking the task of rendering this particular cultural phenomenon might begin with an investigation of its history and attraction.

For example, one would have to take a look at Vaudeville, which emerged in the post-Civil War era, with the rise of industry, large cities and a burgeoning immigrant population, and marked the beginning of popular culture as big business. In fact Jerry Lewis, on whom Bacon's character is loosely modeled, was the son of a vaudevillian. The comedian began his career in burlesque in the 1940s and by the end of the decade teamed up with singer Dean Martin. Their rise to national prominence, above other such acts at that time, was in large part attributed to their loose interplay as a duo—a marked departure from the pre-planned routine.

Egoyan has no interest in history. Otherwise, an examination of trends in American popular culture in the 1950s might have generated something considerably richer and more concrete. Surely, the Martin-Lewis partnership, with its combination of remarkable improvisation, banality, repressed sexuality and 'high anxiety' verging on the hysterical (Lewis), must speak to something about the postwar and Cold War years. However, the filmmaker generally does not trespass beyond the superficial peculiarities and perversities of any situation and his work suffers as a result.

Egoyan's longtime producer, Robert Lantos, describes one of the movie's central concerns as the "quest for truth—about peeling away layer upon layer of hypocrisy and lies; the process of getting right down to the kernel, right down to where the truth lies." It is worth noting that one means Lantos thought might help achieve this objective was to endow the project with a much larger budget and stronger production values than the filmmaker has previously enjoyed. This is consistent with the film's preoccupation with external trappings at the expense of depth. Also, the manner in which the film jumps back and forth in time, as is Egoyan's wont, is largely a diversion, eroding the film's already tenuous internal cohesion.

The most commendable feature of *Where the Truth Lies* is its recreation of the 1950s. Here the production values are at their highest, as the film reproduces the telethon, the unsavory nightclub act, and the garish hotel suites in which obsessions are played out. These scenes, however, hardly qualify as ground-breaking, with slicker representations commonplace in such mediocre movies as Martin Scorsese's *Casino*.

Interestingly, the film has a different feel in its pre-scandal segments. It is more intimate, with the telethon scenes ranking among the best. Unfortunately, even here the considerable skills of Bacon and Firth don't fully compensate for the movie's emotional blankness or, at best, its emotionalism-once-removed. The film loses momentum in its 1970s portion, becoming predictable and perfunctory. Access to the inner lives of the characters, limited before the focus turns to the murder, is nonexistent thereafter. As one critic points out: "But in this relatively big-budget production, the director's main anxiety seems to be wrapping up the mystery and selling the project."

The exceptions are the psycho-charged sex scenes, in which Egoyan seems most heavily invested. The hitherto unengaged viewer is lured or manipulated into the film's most salacious (and gratuitous) sequences. For the erotica, Egoyan goes all out, whether or not it adds to or detracts from the characters' psychological veracity.

Working against the hyped-up sexualizing is the deadness, like an emotional still water, in which Egoyan bathes his creatures. Bacon and Firth seem to be chronically struggling for creative oxygen and the talented Maury Chaykin has to rely on a strange wooden loudness to make his presence felt.

In a piece written about Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, critic Stuart Klawans contends that "all of Egoyan's films have dwelled on the theme of life after loss, the way your mind keeps circling back until time becomes spongy; the way the present moment seems to pass at a slight remove, just beyond the dead space that surrounds your body." Unfortunately, while Klawans' thought is poetic, the actual

experience of Egoyan's films is a different matter.

Nonetheless, there is some truth to the argument about "life after loss." Another commentator argues that Egoyan always tells his stories from "a vantage point of remembrance."

It seems likely that something of Armenian history, especially the mass killing of Armenians by the Turkish authorities during World War I, must come into play here. And legitimately so! But since Egoyan is incapable of treating the implications of events at the level of objective historical processes, much less drawing any larger conclusions from them, the Armenian tragedy and its reverberations are largely reduced to the small change of a personal psychodrama.

In my review of *Ararat*, I wrote: "Unfortunately, Egoyan, in attempting to counter the deniers [of the Armenian genocide] by chronicling this history, is largely defeated by his fashionable hostility to 'grand narratives' and to the objective treatment of historical events. He articulated this hostility in an interview with *PopMatters*, remarking that he believes that 'small gestures' are more telling than 'broad clinical gestures.' He claims, 'Ultimately it's about moments between individuals, negotiations not between countries but between mothers and sons, strangers in a hallway, stepdaughters and mothers.'"

In *Where the Truth Lies*, Egoyan indulges in what he calls his "attraction to the dark side of human behavior." How original! Again, he does so by eschewing the "grand narrative," or broader historical and social framework, in favor of an emphasis on personal responsibility. He wants to stress the consequences of people not taking "this responsibility seriously. It's something that I have observed a lot in my upbringing and, certainly, the relationship between parents or parent figures is something that has really marked a lot of the work I've done." Incorporated into his script, these views emerge with particular force in the banal dialogue between the reporter (Lohman) and the grieving mother of the murdered girl.

Straitjacketed by Egoyan in this manner, the film keeps circling around itself, eventually (and mercifully) seizing upon the easiest out.



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