

Rachel Getting Married: Something, but not everything

Hiram Lee
29 November 2008

Rachel Getting Married, the new film from veteran US director Jonathan Demme, tells the story of Kym (Anne Hathaway), a model with a history of drug addiction, who is released from a rehabilitation facility to attend the wedding of her sister Rachel (Rosemarie DeWitt). There is enormous unease brewing as the troubled sister returns to her family. Her father (Bill Irwin) strains to keep a watchful eye on Kym without appearing as though he's surveilling her every move. Rachel resents her sister for her attention-seeking behavior, and her father for giving in to it. Rachel, the more stable and professional of the two sisters, has found herself in a secondary role in her father's life.

The family lives in a spacious New England home which is milling with musicians, wedding planners, friends and relatives. At the center of everything is the unavoidable memory of a family tragedy. Years earlier, while "stoned out of her mind," a teenage Kym drove her car off a bridge. In the passenger seat was her little brother Ethan, left in her care for the day. As the car submerged into the water beneath the bridge, Kym was unable to get the child out and he drowned. Kym has never forgiven herself for the incident and neither has the family. All have attempted to wallpaper over their feelings and move on.

Rachel Getting Married is a film of considerable intelligence and sensitivity. Screenwriter Jenny Lumet, whose father is director Sidney Lumet, has shown some talent for putting herself in other people's shoes, empathizing without moralizing. It's her sensibility which seems to provide the driving force of the work. Director Jonathan Demme, well known for his ability with actors, draws moving and memorable performances from his cast, particularly from Bill

Irwin, who, having performed for decades as a clown, is able to communicate with subtle but revealing physical movements.

There's something moving about Kym's story. Unforgiven for the tragedy of her youth, Kym has long borne the resentments of her family as well as her own sense of guilt and shame for her horrible mistake, and it has all but destroyed her. During one intense confrontation with her family, Kym demands to know how much longer she is meant to suffer their wrath for her mistake. It's a valuable question. The ceaseless punishing of Kym has only left both her and her remaining family disturbed and shattered.

Another important scene comes during a banquet held after rehearsals for Rachel's wedding. Gathered together at a long table, each guest takes their turn reciting a toast in the couple's honor. They speak meaningfully of what it means to have Rachel and her fiancé Sidney (Tunde Adebimpe) in their lives. Feeling left out, Kym imposes an improvised toast of her own. She makes awkward jokes about her addiction and recovery and talks about herself at length before finally arriving at a surprisingly sincere tribute and apology to Rachel—"for everything"—which Rachel ultimately rejects. One's reaction to Kym's speech is a mixture of embarrassment and admiration. It's a surprisingly well-navigated scene in which a great deal is conveyed regarding Kym's personality, her flaws and strengths, her position within the family and the extent to which that position has brought out certain of those flaws and strengths.

While battles between the sisters will continue throughout the film, there is a beautiful moment of

reconciliation and tenderness between the two which comes much later in the work and doesn't feel cheated or forced. How permanently the peace will last is another question. One can be thankful that a neat, happy ending is avoided for the most part. The film is too honest for that.

But while there is much in *Rachel Getting Married* to admire, there are also significant areas in which the film is lacking. There are times when the work feels "staged," as though it were intended for a theatrical production rather than a film. One too often sees major confrontations and their attendant tour-de-force acting coming long before they actually arrive.

There is the sense in the film that all of the family's miseries stem from the tragedy of Ethan's death, with everyone completely derailed by the trauma. Without minimizing the devastation of such a tragedy, there remains a great deal more to be said and explained.

Too often one sees such family dramas depicted as deeply personal events, isolated—or insulated—from anything outside of the family bubble. Families simply work out or suffer through their secret traumas untouched by the world. Figures within the family, rather than explored concretely as people living under definite circumstances and conditions, are treated as "Father," "Mother," and other timeless or universal archetypes to which the artist allows his or her work to conform.

One is left to ask, what social conditions or pressures have shaped these people, have colored their relationships and their responses to tragedy, to death, to forgiveness, etc. What affect might the politics of law-and-order and personal responsibility so prevalent in the United States have had on this film's wealthy family of executives and professionals and their feelings toward Kym? And what of Kym's status as an infamously troubled model whose ups and downs have become fodder for tabloids? Too little is made of it here.

Rachel Getting Married is no doubt among the more moving and emotionally complex films from an American writer and director released this year, and

certainly one of the more healthy and compassionate works. But its limitations also indicate how much is left for those artists to overcome. Events, as we have pointed out, will have their impact and provide the impetus to change. A conscious engagement on the part of artists with these vital social questions will also be necessary. Jenny Lumet, in her screenwriting debut, has proven herself to be perceptive and insightful up to a point in this direction. One is eager to see how she develops from here.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact