

Lymelife: How filmmakers look at recent American life

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Directed by Derick Martini, written by Derick and Steven Martini

Lymelife, a family drama directed and co-written by Derick Martini (along with his brother Steven), takes place in a New York City suburb in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

Individually, a number of the characters and events are clichéd. A real estate developer tries to sell tawdry pieces of the American Dream, while his marriage dissolves and he carries on with his secretary-assistant. Two teenagers clumsily grope their way toward one another and adulthood. A son confronts his father over the latter's adultery, leading to an apparently permanent rupture.

What holds the spectator's interest, nonetheless, is the fierceness of several sequences and, overall, the movie's fairly harsh view of American life in recent decades, which—although the script for *Lymelife* was apparently written some years ago—feels driven at least in part by present-day considerations. Taken at face value, the film suggests a social context in which unhappiness and dissatisfaction are pervasive.

The real estate developer, Mickey Bartlett (Alec Baldwin), and his wife Brenda (Jill Hennessy), have grown apart. He is on the verge of making a great deal of money, but she wishes she were back in Queens where there were people to talk to. Mickey is conducting an affair with his employee, Melissa Bragg (Cynthia Nixon), whose husband Charlie (Timothy Hutton) has come down with the strangely debilitating and disorienting Lyme disease.

The Bartletts' son Scott (Rory Culkin) has a crush on Adrianna (Emma Roberts), the Braggs' daughter. Meanwhile Scott's older brother Jimmy (Kieran Culkin) has escaped the increasingly tense household by joining the army.

What initially strikes one about the film, and this is the impression that remains the strongest, are certain darkish, quite severe strokes. For instance, images of Charlie, in a business suit, with his bloodshot gaze and a gun over his shoulder, or huddled in front of the television. Asked about his condition, he says it is like "a perpetual acid

trip...sometimes my head is on fire."

Or the real estate project, humbly named "Bartlettown" ("It's the American Dream, right here on Long Island"), which seems ugly and disreputable, as do Mickey's business practices: "I pre-sell, then borrow money from bank." He tells his unenthusiastic wife with confidence, "We will be millionaires."

Jimmy, fresh from basic training, brutally beats up a boy who has been bullying his brother at school. He says of the military, "They teach you how to kill." Scott later emulates his brother and pummels the same boy, quite gratuitously.

An undercurrent of corruption, selfishness and violence...something disturbing is emerging in America, that threatens to blight the characters' lives and, what's perhaps equally alarming, they appear largely unconscious of or indifferent to its presence.

So there's that side to *Lymelife*. On the other hand, the "coming of age" drama is quite weak; it treads familiar ground, and the efforts to create comic moments out of adolescent anxiety and awkwardness feel largely beside the point. Culkin and Roberts do their best, but they seem to be acting in a different film than, for example, Baldwin and Hutton—who are especially strong.

Baldwin effectively captures a social type—a crude, energetic, intellectually narrow, but not mean-spirited parvenu—and Hutton's performance hints at depths of personality that the film is not fully capable of probing. (The final, relatively brief confrontation between the two men in a bar is at once menacing, distressing and pitiable.)

The filmmakers have not integrated the different elements in their work, which simply sit side by side.

Derick Martini's comments also reflect this dichotomy. He is credited in the production notes with this banal summing up of his film, "It's about change: how people change, and how when faced with change they initially resist but ultimately have to embrace change because that's life."

Martini told interviewer Brian Tallerico, "What I tried to do was take the typical coming-of-age story and turn it into what I see as an adult story from an innocent perspective.

That was what got me excited about it.” This is not necessarily promising either, but the 33-year-old director goes on to explain that, while *Lymelife* has strongly autobiographical overtones, he did not set it in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when he was an adolescent, for specific reasons: “From my neck of the woods, it’s really during that time [a decade earlier] when a lot of men that I knew growing up were just becoming wealthy for the first time. I wanted to tell a story that was on the cusp of the ’80s, which, to me, was on the cusp of overindulgence.”

He told Comingsoon.net, “I set it in the ’70s for other reasons. There was a time of this sort of economic boom on the island [suburban Long Island] where lower middle class guys like Mickey, the character Alec Baldwin plays, either Irish-American or Italian-American men—because of this urban sprawling that was going on—were able to jump ahead in class for the first time, and they were able to pursue and chase their version of the American Dream, and then actually attain it. The question always is, ‘At what cost?’”

Intuitively or otherwise, Martini has a hold of something important. It is not necessary here to go into sociological detail, but the late 1970s and early 1980s constituted something of a watershed in American social life. The counter-offensive against the conditions of the broad mass of the population began at that time, and has never seriously let up. This was a process that enriched, for a time at least, certain small and medium business and middle class layers, who formed the backbone of support for Reagan and his ilk.

Martini describes Lyme disease as “a good metaphor” for the various relationships in the film, “which [have] become very corrosive.” No doubt, but the slightly hallucinatory state produced by the disease (which, if untreated, can effect mental functioning) seems to speak to something wider, the illusory quality of the latter-day—far too late in the day to be healthy!—“American success story” of the 1980s and 1990s. Again, the director has the benefit of hindsight and, although filming occurred in the spring or early summer of 2008, something of the impending disaster, with its elements of economic unreality, the effort to make money out of nothing, rubs off on *Lymelife*.

Martini takes on the American Dream, a bad dream in this case, perhaps more strongly than he intends to. A dreamlike quality attaches to the events too, with everything a bit off. As noted, the events occur a decade before Martini was actually a teenager. Moreover, is *Lymelife* set in 1979—the television news covers the Iranian hostage crisis—or 1982—at the time of the Falklands War, to which Jimmy improbably speaks of being dispatched? Economic factors apparently added to the general sense of dislocation. The filmmakers found it too expensive to shoot on Long Island, using suburban New Jersey instead, which doesn’t look precisely

the same. Presumably, some of this off-kilter quality is deliberate.

The understanding that the era then emerging has extended to the present day excludes the possibility of a thoroughly “happy ending.” The film hints there is hope for the younger generation, and no doubt there was, but inevitably the promise of further social reaction and personal dysfunction clouds the final moments. We know things will not turn out well for almost anyone involved.

Unfortunately, presenting Martini’s film in this fashion, from the most flattering angle, gives it undue credit. It is a very uneven work, in which convincing, troubling moments are too often followed by trivial or trite ones. The best parts are considerably more interesting and provocative than the whole.

The dialogue is not especially memorable, even in the scene, which has a certain power, meant as an acting tour de force, where Brenda Bartlett tells her husband off (“I don’t love you anymore.... I hate the way you smell...the way you brush your teeth...the way you eat your fucking food...that shit-eating grin on your face all the time, ugh, it makes me sick...and I won’t spend another night in bed with you...you make me sick to my stomach”).

The Hutton character, one of the most interesting, essentially undergoes no development, and his predicament becomes a little wearying. In general, while the adolescents’ story reaches a denouement, for what it’s worth, the more complicated “adult” drama largely treads water, or meanders into the all-too-easy territory of possible “reconciliation,” on the one hand, and “senseless violence,” on the other. *Lymelife*’s creators do not appear to know *what to do* with their grown-ups and demand too little of themselves in resolving the matter. They are a bit satisfied, one feels, with merely dipping their toes in challenging waters.

All in all, there are some of the ingredients here of a sharp look at things in America. Some—not all—and those are inadequately presented. The Martini brothers need to go deeper into things, but, unfortunately, given the prevailing conditions in the “independent” film world, that is not the most likely development.



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