

MOVIE REVIEW

'Chelsea Walls'

In his directorial debut, actor Ethan Hawke displays a deft hand in bringing the N.Y. hotel's array of compulsive, creative characters to life.

By Kevin Thomas
Times Staff Writer

Apr 19 2002

"Chelsea Walls" is a beautiful, poetic film that captures the aspirations and struggles of a group of creative residents of Manhattan's landmark Chelsea Hotel, legendary home to artists and writers for whom it was built, a haven for such giants as Mark Twain, Thomas Wolfe, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Dylan Thomas and many others. Ethan Hawke, in his feature directorial debut, has brought Nicolette Burdette's play to the screen with fluid grace and a perfect blend of dreaminess and grit, expressed in camerawork that seems to float and in Jeff Tweedy's shimmering, gently insistent score.

As an actor, Hawke has a mature, detached compassion for his fellow artists and their self-destructive, self-indulgent tendencies that not all audiences will be able to match. "Chelsea Walls" is for those sympathetic to the notion that creative aspirations sometimes are accompanied by indolent, insufferable behavior. But for those who are touched by the vulnerability of this film's characters, "Chelsea Walls" is a rewarding experience, admittedly romantic rather than realistic in tone, but ringing ruefully true to human nature. In spirit "Chelsea Walls" is closer to Wim Wenders' recent, dreamlike "The Million Dollar Hotel," set in L.A.'s own venerable Rosslyn, than Andy Warhol's "Chelsea Girls" or, for that matter, even "Sid and Nancy," both of which were set in the Chelsea. Anchoring the film and heading a formidable cast, Kris Kristofferson is Bud, a hard-drinking macho novelist who's beginning to feel the fear of aging and loneliness but also fears he might destroy his beautiful, still-loving wife (a radiant Tuesday Weld) from whom he is separated, should she attempt to save him. On the other hand, his much-younger latest lover (Natasha Richardson) is beginning to feel that his true mistress is his work. "I am a man," he declares. "There are only three men left--

unfortunately, we're all drunks." It's a line Kristofferson gets away with in amused fashion as few could.

Uma Thurman and Rosario Dawson are poets not only striving in their difficult art but also to hold on to their elusive men. The first is in the thrall of a Hollywood filmmaker, heard only from one side of a phone conversation but clearly a selfish jerk, to the extent that she's indifferent to the shy overtures of Vincent D'Onofrio's sensitive painter. The second senses that she's in danger of losing her sweet but immature lover (Mark Webber, of Todd Solandz's "Storytelling") to the temptations of gambling, personified by his dissolute pal (Kevin Corrigan). Thurman's poet makes ends meet by working in a club in the hotel's basement where none other than "Little" Jimmy Scott holds forth; his Skinny Bones is also a Chelsea resident.

Holed up in a small room hard by the hotel's tall neon sign, Robert Sean Leonard's Terry is a gifted singer-composer longing for a girl back home but not about to leave New York for Minnesota and faced with a pal (Steve Zahn) who's more intent on partying than creating music. Among numerous supporting players to this impressive ensemble are such notables as Harris Yulin and Guillermo Diaz. Hawke draws out the best from his large cast in beautifully articulated portrayals that are subtle and so expressive they can sustain the poetic flights in Burdette's dialogue. "Chelsea Walls," which resonates with an awareness of the hotel's hallowed residents of the past in the midst of a decidedly seedy present, is special--and luminous.

MPAA-rated: R, for language. Times guidelines: Besides strong language, film features heavy drinking; adult themes and situations.

'Chelsea Walls'

Kris Kristofferson ... Bud

Uma Thurman ... Grace

Rosario Dawson ... Audrey

Robert Sean Leonard ... Terry

A Lions Gate Films release. Director Ethan Hawke. Producers Gary Winick and Alexis Alexanian; Christine Vachon and Pamela Koffler. Executive producers Jonathan Sehring, Caroline Kaplan and John Sloss. Screenplay Nicole Burdette; based on her play. Cinematographer Tom Richmond, in collaboration with Richard Rutkowski. Editor Adriana Pacheco. Music Jeff Tweedy. Costumes Catherine Marie Thomas. Production designer Rick Butler. Art director Emmy Castlen. Running time: 1 hour, 52 minutes.

Exclusively at the Sunset 5, 8000 Sunset Blvd., (323) 848-3500.

Copyright 2004 Los Angeles Times