

MOVIE REVIEW

Feeling Minnesota

Brotherly Love at Its Most Dire

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A movie that kicks off with Johnny Cash roaring "Ring of Fire" and ends up with Bob Dylan torture-moaning the same tune over the closing credits begs the question: Is it the song or the singer? By the end of "Feeling Minnesota," you have to conclude that it's just not enough to put footloose amorality, casual viciousness and overriding doom on the big screen. There's got to be something to keep the self-assured bravado from becoming a self-conscious, raspy wheeze.

The debut by actor-turned-painter-turned-filmmaker Steven Baigelman, "Feeling Minnesota" gives us brotherly love at its most dire: As a kid, the neglected Jjaks (Keanu Reeves) was sent to live with his father because--as his pot-smoking mom Nora (Tuesday Weld) puts it--he came second. Nora kept his older brother Sam (Vincent D'Onofrio) with her, raising an already dubious personality into an all-star loser and accountant for mobster Red (Delroy Lindo). Jjaks comes home on the day of Sam's wedding--to Freddie (Cameron Diaz), who's being forced to marry Sam as payback to Red--has sex with her in the bathroom, robs a gas station, runs off with Freddie, and gets caught up in violence, murder and familial mayhem.

Just another day in Middle America? Or a copycat crime? Although "Feeling Minnesota's" title suggests the Coen brothers, it lacks the deadpan pseudo-seriousness of a "Raising Arizona" or certainly "Fargo." Within the progressively ruthless three-way dance of Jjaks, Sam and Freddie we have a suggestion of "The Last Seduction" but without that film's amoral frankness or bite. The go-for-broke plot twists are daring, but because there's no sense of background to the characters, one gets the sense it's all being made up as Baigelman goes along.

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When a particular misfortune befalls Nora at the wedding, Ben the detective (Dan Aykroyd), a

character straight out of Zap Comix, complains to Jjaks, "This always happens when you show up." And we ask what? When? And why do we have to ask?

Having the overexposed (Reeves), the underexposed (D'Onofrio) and the soon-to-be-overexposed (Diaz) is a mixed blessing for Baigelman, who shows talent if not vision. Diaz is not just among the sexier women in films, she's a good actress; D'Onofrio isn't afraid to play a hapless jerk and make him convincing, if excessive. There's also a very likable if small performance by Courtney Love. But Reeves has basically one demeanor--a wholly introspective intensity frustrated by intellectual shortcoming--that brings the wider aspirations of "Feeling Minnesota" safely back into the bemused realm of Gen-X thumb-sucking. And that's the last thing we need.

Feeling Minnesota, 1996. R, for violence, sexuality and language. A Jersey Films production, released by Fine Line Features. Director Steven Baigelman. Producers Danny DeVito, Michael Shamberg, Stacey Sher. Screenplay by Steven Baigelman. Cinematographer Walt Lloyd. Editor Martin Walsh. Costumes Eugenie Bafaloukos. Music Karyn Rachtman. Production design Naomi Shohan. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Keanu Reeves as Jjaks. Vincent D'Onofrio as Sam. Cameron Diaz as Freddie. Delroy Lindo as Red. Tuesday Weld as Nora. Dan Aykroyd as Ben. Courtney Love as Waitress.

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