



Vivid Family Saga Set in Little Italy

Newsday; 9/15/1993; Gene Seymour

Newsday

09-15-1993

Vivid Family Saga Set in Little Italy

By Gene Seymour. STAFF WRITER

THREE STARS HOUSEHOLD SAINTS. (R) The parts of this magical-realistic tale of love, faith and sausage-making in Little Italy are far greater than its unwieldy whole. Wonderful performances, though, by Tracey Ullman, Vincent D'Onofrio, Lilli Taylor and Judith Malina. Directed by Nancy Savoca. At the Angelika Film Center, Mercer and Houston Streets and the Sutton Twin, 57th Street and Third Avenue, Manhattan.

GOD, AS THE expression goes, is in the details. And it is in the details that "Household Saints," a magical-realistic family epic set in New York's Little Italy, achieves its best moments. Director Nancy Savoca ("True Love") displays a large heart, a keen eye and an engaging feel for personality in this quirky, uneven film, which she and producer-husband Richard Guay adapted from a novel by Francine Prose. It begins on a sweltering summer night shortly after World War II. At the tail end of a long, wine-soaked pinochle game, roguish neighborhood butcher Joseph Santangelo (Vincent D'Onofrio) makes a wager with Falconetti (Victor Argo), the radio repairman across the street. If the butcher's hand is good, he'll marry the repairman's dreamy, sullen teenage daughter, Catherine (Tracey Ullman.) Falconetti loses. But as far as Joseph's mystic-minded mama, Carmela (Judith Malina), is concerned, her son is the loser. She can't even make a decent antipasto, Carmela mutters of her new

daughter-in-law. Nonetheless, Catherine is guided through all the Italian matriarch's sacred rites - especially the fine art of making sausage. (Don't be surprised if, while watching Savoca's rich sequences of rolling and seasoning meat, your mouth starts to water.)

Shortly after Carmela dies, Joseph and Catherine are blessed with the birth of a daughter, Teresa, who, as she grows up in the '50s and '60s (Lilli Taylor plays her as a teenager), is blessed-cursed with a religious faith as mystical as - and far more overpowering than - Carmela's.

Watching Savoca handle this thick and spicy mix is almost as engrossing as watching Carmela make her sausage. One gets an authentic feel of the '40s, '50s and '60s, right down to Ullman's hairstyles and the apartment decor, that is in no way mitigated by the occasional fantasy sequences that sprout in the middle of the story.

The problem comes when Savoca tries to maintain a narrative structure solid enough to contain all the intriguing particulars. Somewhere toward the middle, as the story's focus shifts almost entirely to Teresa, the story line starts to wobble and trip over itself much like the awkward adolescent Taylor plays with such affecting grace. The focus on Teresa becomes so intense, in fact, that it blurs the other characters into near-insignificance. One wonders, in fact, if the novelistic nature of the story would have been better served in a mini-series form. (Except that no network, public, private or cable, would know what to do with it.)

If the characters remain vivid throughout, it's because of the performances. Ullman's mimetic and empathic gifts are the stuff of legend by now. But it is the way D'Onofrio handles his character's evolution from youthful swagger to middle-aged befuddlement that provides the film's subtle charge - and maybe its most gratifying surprise.

If, by the end of "Household Saints," one feels somewhat stuffed and lousy, it may be because Savoca herself became overwhelmed by the ingredients she had and felt compelled to jam as many of them in as possible.

Copyright 1993, Newsday Inc.

HighBeam Research, LLC. © Copyright 2004. All rights reserved.