



[Home](#) > [Search Results](#) > Chelsea Walls

[http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print\\_review&reviewid=VE1117798030&categoryid=31](http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=print_review&reviewid=VE1117798030&categoryid=31)

To print this page, select "PRINT" from the File Menu of your browser.

Posted: Fri., May 11, 2001, 3:52pm PT

## Chelsea Walls

A Lions Gate release from InDigEnt of an Independent Film Channel Prods. presentation in association with Killer Films of an Under the Influence film. (International sales: Cinetic Media, N.Y.) Produced by Gary Winick, Alexis Alexanian, Christine Vachon, Pamela M. Koffler. Executive producers, Jonathan Sehring, John Sloss.

Directed by Ethan Hawke. Screenplay, Nicole Burdette, based on her play.

Crutches - Kevin Corrigan  
Audrey - Rosario Dawson  
Frank - Vincent D'Onofrio  
Bud - Kris Kristofferson  
Terry - Robert Sean Leonard  
Mary - Natasha Richardson  
Grace - Uma Thurman  
Val - Mark Webber  
Greta - Tuesday Weld  
Lynny - Frank Whaley  
Ross - Steve Zahn

---

By [TODD MCCARTHY](#)

---

**The "Chelsea Walls" speak a great deal, but they don't have much to say. A dull ensembler about contempo poetasters who can only hope that some of the talent of the famed Gotham hotel's former occupants will rub off on them, Ethan Hawke's feature directorial debut sports a bunch of hip-type actors carrying on in mostly two-hander scenes to little effect. Without critical support, this Lions Gate release will have a very short theatrical stay.**

In 1993, Hawke made a short, "Straight to One," about a couple living at the Chelsea, and he returns here with a script by Naked Angels theater company co-founder Nicole Burdette based on her 1986 play. At least as presented here, the writing feels shallow and immature, as it's rooted in youthful romantic notions about the artistic bohemian lifestyle without evidence of artistry, genuine alternative impulses or personal flair to support it.

Impressionistic piece takes place almost entirely within the confines of the hotel. While it has definitely seen better days, a great part of the establishment's charm is that nothing has changed in decades, lending it a timeless feel that is abetted by the fact that none of the characters has anything as high-tech as a computer or a cell phone. Just as they always did, poets scribble on paper, musicians strum their guitars in the wee hours, painters' canvases take over their entire apartments and writers drink far into the night in search of inspiration.

Whether or not any of the characters has enough talent to make them worthy successors to the rooms of Dylan Thomas, Mark Twain, Thomas Wolfe, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Brendan Behan, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix or even Sid Vicious is doubtful, if unknowable. What is clear is that their personal lives are stifled and, given the exciting city in which they live, remarkably mundane. They should get out a little more.

Insecure poet and waitress Grace (Uma Thurman), whose b.f. has gone Hollywood, could get interested in painter Frank (Vincent D'Onofrio), but he's too shy to make a move; aging writer Bud (Kris Kristofferson) struggles with booze, his voluminous unfinished manuscript and the lovely women in his life, wife Greta (Tuesday Weld) and mistress Mary (Natasha Richardson); another female poet, Audrey (Rosario Dawson), has a particularly opaque reunion with Val (Mark Webber), who is susceptible to the bad influence of druggie scenester Crutches (Kevin Corrigan); and new-in-town Midwestern musicians Terry (Robert Sean Leonard) and Ross (Steve Zahn) deal in their own ways with the lifestyle and available women they find as soon as they arrive.

Part of the point, of course, is that these characters are trying to live off "the vibe" of their old digs, to sponge off its ghosts. But their endeavors never take on lives of their own, their art is never made to seem urgent or necessary, and their personal relations are fraught with indecision, hesitancy and fear that make for very uneventful and unsatisfying drama. In only one scene, in which Bud tells a story of having had his leg hugged by a little girl in an elevator and her mother telling him, "When she grows up, she's going to fall in love with men like you and not know why," does the writing achieve a notable level of poetry and poignancy. And while the yarn passes from one day through the night into the next morning, there is no sense of passage

from darkness to light in any grander metaphorical or thematic sense.

With all the talented thespians Hawke was able to recruit, it's too bad there isn't more opportunity for them to strut their stuff. Mostly, they are constrained by the severe emotional inhibitions of their characters, and too often the scenes seem fragmentary, without strong build-ups or pay-offs. Coming off best, under the circumstances, are Kristofferson, Weld and particularly Richardson, with the latter especially shining in an increasingly emotional late interview her character gives on the subject of Bud. Singer Jimmy Scott appears more or less as himself, although his big nightclub performance is unfortunately interrupted by cutaways to another character.

Using digital video enabled Hawke to shoot with relative ease throughout the Chelsea, but visual results in the 35mm transfer are just OK, with images tending to look washed out and saturated with particular hues as in color photocopies. Variable musical accompaniment practically wallpapered the picture.

**Also with:** Jimmy Scott, John Seitz, Harris Yulin.

Camera (DuArt color, digital video-to-35mm), Tom Richmond, in association with Richard Rutowski; editor, Adriana Pacheco; music, Jeff Tweedy; production designer, Richard Butler; art director, Emmy Castlen; costume designer, Catherine Thomas; sound (Dolby Digital), Robert Lauren; line producer, Jon Marcus; associate producer, Sam Connelly; assistant director, Danny Torres; casting, Sheila Jaffe, Georgianne Walken. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Directors Fortnight), May 11, 2001. Running time: 109 MIN.

Read the full article at:

<http://www.variety.com/story.asp?l=story&r=VE1117798030&c=31>

Like this article? Variety.com has over 100,000 articles, 35,000 reviews and 10,000 pages of charts. Subscribe today!

<http://www.variety.com/emailfriend>

or call (866) MY-VARIETY.

Can't commit? Sign up for a free 14-day trial!

<http://www.variety.com/emailfriend>

© 2004 Reed Business Information © 2004 Variety, Inc.  
Use of this Website is subject to [Terms of Use](#). [Privacy Policy](#)