

Odyssey of dependencies

Teen passes through variety of addictions in clever coming-of-age tale

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BY LISA ROSE

Star-Ledger Staff

Thumbsucker

R) Sony Pictures Classics (96 min.) Directed by Mike Mills. Stars Lou Pucci, Tilda Swinton, Vincent D'Onofrio, Keanu Reeves, Vince Vaughn. Opens Friday at theaters in New York Stars: 3

Template-driven filmmaking isn't restricted to Hollywood back lots. Indie directors are just as prone to formula as their studio counterparts. A particularly popular premise to clone is the misfit teen coming-of-age tale. The trend dates back to 1995's suburban angst manifesto, "Welcome to the Dollhouse." "Thumbsucker" has all the hallmarks of the subgenre: eccentric characters, deadpan humor, hipster soundtrack (as performed by the Polyphonic Spree) and irony writ large. While it isn't a pioneering piece of filmmaking, "Thumbsucker" travels a familiar path in an engaging way, bolstered by a heady cast and smart, unsparing writing. Director Mike Mills, adapting a novel by Walter Kirn, allows the actors room to experiment. Vince Vaughn plays against smooth-talking type, Keanu Reeves mocks his "Matrix" persona, and Benjamin Bratt offers a memorable portrayal of a desperate drug addict. The main character is played by Lou Pucci, a promising newcomer with Central Jersey roots. Justin (Pucci) is a teenager who clings to childhood by sucking his thumb. Arrested development runs in the family, as his parents (Tilda Swinton, Vincent D'Onofrio) hold fast to youth as well. His mother worships celebrities. His father seeks to relive high school glory through athletic competitions. Justin's New Age orthodontist and surrogate father figure, Perry (Reeves) tries to heal him through hypnosis. Justin kicks the habit, but his grades begin to plummet. A guidance counselor diagnoses him with attention deficit disorder and suggests a Ritalin regimen. Justin's thumb dependency turns into drug dependency. The medication helps him focus academically, and he soon emerges as the star of the debate team, led by a lecherous coach (Vaughn). He crashes and burns just as quickly,

however, replacing the meds with marijuana, courtesy of his hippie dream girl (Kelli Garner). Blunt insight and provocative metaphor pervade Justin's journey, along with a generous amount of acerbic wit. We'll forgive the director the indulgent dream sequences. Even though everyone in the central character's life is emotionally stunted in some way, he learns something through each of his relationships. His experiments with various antidotes help him to ultimately recognize that there was nothing to cure in the first place.

Rating note: The film contains sexual content, disturbing imagery, strong language, teen drinking and drug use.

<http://www.nytimes.com>

A Teenager With an Embarrassing Habit Finds Transformation Through Ritalin

By [A. O. SCOTT](#)

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Many of Justin Cobb's problems are of the kind you would expect to find bedeviling the teenage hero of a coming-of-age movie, especially one like "[Thumbsucker](#)," which made its debut at the Sundance Film Festival. Justin, played by a slight, hollow-cheeked young actor named Lou Pucci, lives in a nondescript suburban house (in Beaverwood, Ore.), with his eccentric, wistful mother, Audrey ([Tilda Swinton](#)), his distant, disapproving dad, Jack ([Vincent D'Onofrio](#)), and a younger brother (Chase Offerle) who shows up from time to time to give Justin strange looks. Justin must also contend with the tedium of school and the torment of adolescent lust, whose object is an idealistic classmate named Rebecca ([Kelli Garner](#)). The trait that distinguishes Justin from his numerous literary and cinematic peers is the one that gives this smart, quiet film, adapted from Walter Kirn's novel, its name. Justin's great shame - and also his great comfort - is that at age 16, he still sucks his thumb. This baffles his mother, enrages his father and provokes a benevolent intervention from Perry Lyman, a visionary orthodontist played with low-key wit by [Keanu Reeves](#). When Justin trades in his thumb habit for a Ritalin prescription, he also replaces Perry with a new surrogate father, his high school debate coach ([Vince Vaughn](#)). The drug unleashes a maniacal eloquence, which turns Justin from a timid,

nebbishy kid into a forensic powerhouse and also, as those around him come to discover, a bit of a monster. Mr. Pucci, emerging slowly from behind a stray lock of brown hair, plays Justin's ambiguous transformation with deft understatement. And Mike Mills, who wrote and directed, keeps the film from slipping either into melodrama or facile satire, the two traps into which this genre is most apt to fall. In adapting Mr. Kirn's book, Mr. Mills, making his feature-film debut after a varied career as a graphic artist and video director, has also updated and streamlined it, bringing the story from the early 1980's into the present day and pruning away a few subplots. His style is less antic than Mr. Kirn's, but he still manages to preserve the wry sense of absurdity that is the novel's great virtue. The characters, none of them blessed with much self-awareness, take themselves very seriously, and the comedy of their self-delusion is left for the audience to discover. Instead of structuring his scenes around obvious comic beats, Mr. Mills tiptoes in and out of them, so that our laughter and our understanding sneak up on us. As does our appreciation of the acting. The adults (including [Benjamin Bratt](#) in a very funny cameo as a television star Audrey is infatuated with) are flawless, and Ms. Swinton, with her long face and long front teeth, has an unusually strong family resemblance to Mr. Pucci. Mr. D'Onofrio stealthily injects pathos into his marginal role, and Mr. Reeves and Mr. Vaughn manage to send up their movie-star images without calling undue attention to themselves. All of them give Mr. Pucci plenty of room and support, and allow him to give Justin an unusual and welcome degree of individuality. "Thumbsucker" is a modest movie, but its refusal of large gestures and loud noises is a decided virtue. It manages to show how calamitous and out of control (and also how thrilling) growing up odd and ordinary can be, without wallowing in its hero's occasional self-pity or condescending to him.

"Thumbsucker" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has some profanity, teenage drug use and sexuality, and the graphic depiction of a nonorthodontic medical procedure.

Thumbsucker

Opens today in New York and Los Angeles. Directed by Mike Mills; written by Mr. Mills, based on the novel by Walter Kirn; director of photography, Joaquin Baca-Asay; edited by

Haines Hall and Angus Wall; music by Tim De Laughter; production designer, Judy Becker; produced by Anthony Bregman and Bob Stephenson; released by Sony Pictures Classics. Running time: 96 minutes. This film is rated R. WITH: Lou Pucci (Justin Cobb), [Tilda Swinton](#) (Audrey Cobb), [Vince Vaughn](#) (Mr. Geary), [Vincent D'Onofrio](#) (Mike Cobb), [Keanu Reeves](#) (Perry Lyman), [Benjamin Bratt](#) (Matt Schramm), [Kelli Garner](#) (Rebecca) and Chase Offerle (Joel Cobb).

<http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/story/346712p-295892c.html>

Thumbsucker

By Robert Dominguez

At Empire 25, Lincoln Square, Union Square 14 (1:37). R: Drug and alcohol use, sexuality involving teens, language, a disturbing image.

A gentle, beautifully acted character study about a suburban high-schooler dealing with atypical teenage angst, "Thumbsucker" is a quirky coming-of-age tale where just about every character is going through some sort of change. Director Mike Mills, making his feature debut, enlisted big names for the supporting roles. But it's current indie "It" boy Lou Pucci, as an introverted teen with a thing for thumbs, who holds his own with the likes of Tilda Swinton, Vincent D'Onofrio, Keanu Reeves and Vince Vaughn. Pucci plays 17-year-old Justin Cobb, a closet thumbsucker whose infantile habit seemingly soothes his insecurities and fears about growing up. But Justin also has to put up with parents going through their own growing pains - a father (D'Onofrio) having a mid-life crisis and a mother (Swinton) who may be having an affair with a TV star (Benjamin Bratt). A deadpan Reeves is a hoot as Justin's New Age dentist searching for an identity, while Vaughn, playing against type, is solid as Justin's manipulative debate-club teacher living through his students. Yet it's Pucci - who's already won a couple of acting prizes on the festival circuit, including Sundance - who steals the film with a wonderful performance blending the awkward innocence, vulnerability and pain of being a teen.