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Director Sam Mendes is no stranger to dissecting the American psyche, and in *Revolutionary Road* he takes a merciless look at the hopes and dreams of a middle-class couple in mid-1950s suburban Connecticut. It is the American dream turned nightmare, but it avoids a narrow focus on Americana and develops into a powerful drama about what happens when unrealized dreams are allowed to fester. The results in *Revolutionary Road* are entrancing, but distinctly unpleasant.

Frank and April Wheeler (Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet) are good-looking, intellectually ambitious, but rather ordinary young people who captivate one other at a party and subsequently get married. They get themselves a nice suburban house on the ironically named Revolutionary Road. This lovely, well-lit cottage, with its garden, its "modern" Nordic furnishings, and its well stocked bar is the graveyard of their dreams, and their love. Frank gets a job as a salesman in a company making office machines, while April finds her theatrical ambitions withering on the vine after her performance with a local amateur theater group fails to meet expectations.

Unlike the Wheeler's friends the Campbells, April is not content to laugh off this failure over a couple of drinks

and get on with a pleasant, if not terribly meaningful, existence.

She has dreams, and these dreams, in her own estimation at least, make her a little bit special — a cut above the people around her who are content with their small town life that revolves around local gossip, drinks in the lounge, and a comfortable acceptance of a claustrophobic conformity.

Mendes paints an ugly picture of the world surrounding the Wheelers; limned in fear of what other people might think and envy of those who dare to step out of line. There is a splendid performance by Dylan Baker as one of Frank's colleagues, an office hack who lives from one hangover to the next, barely staying afloat in the cubicle environment of big office anonymity. We can only applaud the Wheelers for wanting out, for daring, even if just for a moment, to resist the kind of robotic existence that is uncomfortably akin to something out of *The Stepford Wives* (the 1974 original rather than the 2004 remake). But the Wheelers are far from being anti-establishment heroes. Their belief that they are special derives as much from self-love and vanity as any virtue of character or talent. The fact that these very ordinary people are played by two of the dream factory's best known faces, who also link back to the romantic fairy tale of *Titanic* (1997), sets up a jangling disharmony in the background that is almost like a second sound track, opening up interpretations about what it is to have dreams, to be special, to be yourself. In an age in which we are brought up to believe in our own special and unique individuality, this can be decidedly uncomfortable and makes *Revolutionary Road* something of a parable for modern times.

DiCaprio is brilliantly cast as Frank, inhabiting a region between the pretty boy of *Titanic*, hope and romance still alive in his face, and the coarse, bejeweled features of the corporate bosses Frank pretends to despise. His somewhat wooden delivery fits a character who doesn't really know who he is, and seems to be constantly aping something or someone else. Frank Wheeler is a composite of the establishment and the ideas espoused by the beatnik movement, but he is neither fish nor fowl nor good red herring. Winslet, as April, adopts a style that out-Streeps Meryl in even her iciest roles as she transforms from an admirable woman who takes her dreams seriously to someone who won't let go, tearing herself and her family apart, neither bold enough to set out on her own, nor resigned enough to settle for something less. We want to sympathize with her, but stubbornness turns to bitterness and then something close to madness, and at the extremity of her torment, she almost succeeds in alienating herself from any possibility of sympathy. This is a role that cements Winslet as very much more than a decorative presence in cinema.

Mendes' presentation is extremely staid, as is the dialogue, and only needs a proscenium to fully disengage the audience from the action. The atmosphere of the film has something of the autopsy table about it; as we look down on

*Film Notes*  
**REVOLUTIONARY ROAD**  
 DIRECTED BY: SAM MENDES  
 STARRING: LEONARDO DICAPRIO (FRANK WHEELER), KATE WINSLET (APRIL WHEELER), MICHAEL SHANNON (JOHN GIVINGS), KATHY BATES (HELEN GIVINGS), DAVID HARBOUR (SHEP CAMPBELL), KATHRYN HAHN (MILLY CAMPBELL)  
 RUNNING TIME: 119 MINUTES  
 TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

how the relationship between the Wheelers died, our minds are half on the mortality of our own loves and dreams, rather than engrossed in their plight.

The part of John Givings (Michael Shannon), a mathematician on leave from a mental institution, who serves the function of a holy fool, speaking the truth in the guise of madness, is a little too self-consciously deployed as a device to underline the contradictions that tear the Wheelers apart. But then, Mendes has never been light-handed in his treatments, and in *Revolutionary Road*, the same lack of subtlety that marked both *American Beauty* (1999) and *Jarhead* (2005) slightly diminishes the film. Nevertheless, the strong script, which is not without its humorous moments, largely overcomes both the bleak story and disengaged presentation to make for an excellent and thoughtful two hours in the cinema.

Warning: moving to the suburbs can be bad for your marriage

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
 STAFF REPORTER



# Where dreams go sour

## An IRS do-gooder and other strangeness

Whatever you do, even if that means watching this movie, don't touch the jellyfish

BY A.O. SCOTT  
 NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK  
*Seven Pounds*, which reunites Will Smith with Gabriele Muccino (who directed him in *The Pursuit of Happyness*), begins with a series of riddling, chronologically scrambled scenes. A man calls 911 to report his own suicide. He badgers a blind call-center employee — whom we suspect will be a significant character, since he's played by Woody Harrelson — with complaints and insults. He embraces a lovely woman in an even lovelier beach house. He visits a nursing home where he terrorizes an administrator and comforts a resident.  
 For a while it is pleasant enough to contemplate these loose ends, and to tease from them the possible contours of a story. It is never unpleasant to watch Smith, who likes to play peek-a-boo with his charm, hiding it now and then behind fleeting shadows of anguish or malice. The music (Angelo Milli's score and a handful of emotive pop songs) combines with the deep colors of Philippe le Sourd's cinematography to summon up intensities of sentiment not yet arrived at by the narrative, creating an interesting frisson of suspense. After a while, though, as the pieces of the puzzle snap together, curiosity gives way to incredulity.  
 Near the end of *Seven Pounds* a carefully laminated piece of paper appears, on which someone has written, "DO NOT TOUCH THE JELLYFISH." I wouldn't dream of it,

and I'll take the message as a warning not to divulge the astonishing things that happen, not all of them involving aquatic creatures.  
 Frankly, though, I don't see how any review could really spoil what may be among the most transcendently, eye-poppingly, call-your-friend-ranting-in-the-middle-of-the-night-just-to-go-over-it-one-more-time crazily awful motion pictures ever made. I would tell you to go out and see it for yourself, but you might take that as a recommendation rather than a plea for corroboration. Did I really see what I thought I saw?  
 And I wish I could spell out just what that was, but you wouldn't believe me, and the people at Sony might not invite me to any more screenings. So instead of spelling out what happens in *Seven Pounds*, I'll just pluck a few key words and phrases from my notes, and arrange them in the kind of artful disorder Muccino seems to favor (feel free to start crying any time): Eggplant parmesan. Printing press. Lung. Bone marrow. Eye transplant. Rosario Dawson. Great Dane. Banana peel. Jellyfish (but you knew that already). Car accident. Congestive heart failure.  
 Huh? What the ... ? Hang on. What's he doing? Why? Who does he think he is? Jesus! That last, by the way, is not an exclamation of shock but rather an answer to the preceding question, posed with reference to Smith. Lately he has taken so eagerly



Will Smith, left, and Rosario Dawson star in *Seven Pounds*, directed by Gabriele Muccino.  
 PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

*Film Notes*  
**SEVEN POUNDS**  
 DIRECTED BY: GABRIELE MUCCINO  
 STARRING: WILL SMITH (BEN THOMAS), ROSARIO DAWSON (EMILY POSA), WOODY HARRELSON (EZRA), BARRY PEPPER (DAN), MICHAEL EALY (BEN'S BROTHER)  
 RUNNING TIME: 118 MINUTES  
 TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

to roles predicated on heroism and world-saving self-sacrifice — see *I Am Legend* and *Hancock* — that you may wonder if he has a messiah clause in

his contract. Which is not to say that he doesn't show range in these films, in which he credibly plays a research scientist, a dissolute superhero and, in this latest one, an IRS agent.  
 An IRS agent who wants only to help people. This is a nice, small joke that provides a few grace notes of levity in what is otherwise a lugubrious exercise in spiritual bushwa. For all its pious, earnest air, *Seven Pounds* cries out to be remade as an Asian horror movie, so that the deep, creepy grotesqueness of its governing premise might be allowed to flourish, rather than to fester beneath the surface.  
 As it is, the movie is basically an inverted, twisted tale of revenge. Ben Thomas, Smith's character, is in essence a benevolent vigilante, harassing, stalking and spying on unsuspecting citizens for their own good, and also to punish himself. Why such misery should also be inflicted on an innocent, affirmation-hungry audience — and also on the marvelous Dawson, who plays one of Ben's victim-beneficiaries — is another matter entirely.  
 But maybe I'm approaching this in the wrong way. Maybe *Seven Pounds* isn't a spiritual parable about redemption or forgiveness or salvation or whatever, but rather a collection of practical lessons. Don't drive while using a BlackBerry. Fertilize your rose bushes with banana peels — sorry, that was a spoiler. But please, whatever you do, don't touch the jellyfish.  
 I'm serious. Don't.

### OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

- Man on Wire**  
 Here is a highly decorated documentary that goes back to 1974 and captures the extraordinary moment when the Frenchman Philippe Petit illegally walked a tightrope back and forth between New York City's brand new World Trade Center towers. Archive footage, interviews and dramatizations combine to tell how Petit and his colleagues set up the attempt. Critics raved about this rich, suspenseful and sometimes hilarious tale, which in a way reclaims the World Trade Center as a site for the better side of human ambition. Music by Michael Nyman.
- 100 Feet**  
 Eric Red did some fine work back in the 1980s as the writer of *The Hitcher* and *Near Dark* but never really lived up to his potential as a director. *100 Feet* may help him out of that rut, and some horror fans have really taken to this story of a woman who is sentenced to home detention for killing her abusive husband — and then falls foul of his prowling ghost. For many years horror movies were overwhelmed by smart-aleck humor, then more recently by torture scenes in lieu of suspense. This film transcends both by treating the viewer to old-fashioned atmosphere and shocks. Stars Famke Janssen of the *X-Men* movies and Michael Pare.
- Mermaid**  
 A cheery fantasy rooted in grim foundations, this Russian film focuses on a young woman with an unfortunate childhood and a gift for psychokinesis. When she starts a relationship with a non-committal professional man, the fantasy elements kick in as romantic rivalry comes to the fore. Winner of several awards at festivals around the world, this is a fine Russian response to the French flick *Amelie*. Original title: *Rusalka*.
- 8 Dates**  
 This more episodic Spanish serio-comedy mixes romance and romantic insecurity as a range of characters find or fall foul of love in a number of interconnected scenarios. Most people in the audience will find a situation they can relate to, no doubt, but much of the film's potency may require familiarity with Spanish celebrities.

