

Jewish Angst Aplenty in Todd Solondz Take on Dystopia

Written by Film Review by Kam Williams



Life during Wartime

Taking a page from the Coen Brothers, whose semi-autobiographical *A Serious Man* captured what life was like coming of age in the late Sixties, Todd Solondz, here, serves up a much more twisted take on growing up Jewish in Florida instead of the Midwest. *Life during Wartime* also revolves around a 12 year-old (Dylan Riley Snider) studying for his bar mitzvah, but the dystopia in which he is immersed is far more bizarre than anything in the Coen's relatively comical adventure.

The movie is ostensibly a sequel to Solondz' *Happiness* (1998), since the three adult sisters at the center of that somber suburban dramedy, Trish, Joy and Helen, are all back, although played by different actresses. In fact, the cast has been totally overhauled, so it might be best to think of this flick as *sui generis* instead of as an update.

Regardless, Timmy Maplewood and his two siblings (Emma Hinz and Chris Marquette) are being raised by Trish (Allison Janney), a single-mom who has tricked her kids into believing their father is deceased. Truth be told, he's a convict serving a long prison term for child molestation. As the film unfolds, Trish has just met a nice Jewish man on a blind date that she actually could settle down with. Nebbishy Harvey (Michael Lerner) is refreshingly normal, although he comes with baggage, a highly-neurotic son (Rich Pecci) with a dark view of the world, namely, that, "In the end, China will take over."

The plot thickens when pedophilic Bill Maplewood is paroled, and returns to town unannounced. Meanwhile, sister Joy (Shirley Henderson) is enduring even more depravity in her dysfunctional relationship with her African-American husband, Allen (Michael K. Williams), who is not only unemployed but unable to control his sexual impulses. These two bottom out while celebrating

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their anniversary in a restaurant when he's slapped by a waitress who recognizes him as a pervert. It doesn't help that she continues to feel guilt about the suicide of her high school sweetheart (Paul "Pee-wee Herman" Reubens).

Finally, we have scriptwriter sister Helen (Ally Sheedy), a spoiled-rotten narcissist living in the lap of luxury who nonetheless complains about "feeling crushed by the enormity of my success." For all their weirdness ranging from the eccentric to the antisocial to the criminal to the uncertain, kudos to director Solondz for again crafting an ensemble of recognizable personas so realistic that they border on the palpable.

They don't make Jews like Jesus anymore!

Excellent (4 stars)

Unrated

Running time: 98 Minutes

Distributor: IFC Films

To see a trailer for Life during Wartime, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EC9D-WXjJjk>