

# Montclair

Contributed by Noralil Ryan Fores  
Monday, 11 June 2007

Mike Ramsdell's feature film debut *Montclair* is quite simple, utterly honest and built of tiny moments that speak to a generation.

From its first shot, Mike Ramsdell's feature film debut *Montclair* exudes the intimate. With the careful eye of cinematographer Neil Moore, there's a sweetness to the film's glance, as if it's a home video, a portrait of people Ramsdell knows and loves. A mix of both traditional narrative and intercut documentary footage of the residents of the Jersey suburb, the film shelters the naturalistic, embracing in its performances, composition and editing an ease of pace and tone. It's quite simple, utterly honest and built of tiny moments that speak to a generation.

With a multi-narrative structure, the film plays out much like a series of interconnected short stories, its characters flowing into and out of one another's lives at critical intersections. While Jay (Justin Barrett) and wife Amy (Alecia Hurst) debate the pros and cons of having another child, Suzanne's (Jenni Tooley) feelings waver about her own pregnancy. Likewise, loner comedian Bruce (Bruce Sinofsky) starts to come out of a divorce-induced funk just as outspoken Vaclav (Jeremy Schwartz) learns to accept his infant son's death. The stories collide in bursts, each meaningful but subtly explored. There's nothing demanding about the importance of the interactions. *Montclair*'s characters simply are, and Ramsdell, without laying his hands heavily on them, allows them the space to discover themselves.

In the hands of Barrett, Hurst, Tooley and Sinofsky, the performances are understated, realistic portraits of suburban culture. Hurst, in particular, seems so comfortable on screen that she seems not to act but just to be. Charged with perhaps the most controversial role in the film, Tooley, on the other hand, in perfect form for the portrayal of Suzanne seems quite aware of outside observation, or as she calls it in the film "judgment." She's appropriately awkward and quietly engaging, her silent yearning to understand herself and her desires heartbreaking. Unlike the rest, Schwartz is granted space to indulge in the eccentric and quirky. His overblown exuberance and spirit add a much needed comic respite to a film that speaks candidly and with clarity about serious issues. Essential to the humor of the film as well are minor characters Johnathan Lindner, the quintessentially heart-warming balloon vendor, and Chuck (Joe Narciso), the ever-anxious radio manager.

The primary weakness of the film, ironically, comes from the same source that gives it its strength. As a film built out of the intimate, the experiences explored are those relegated to a generation of 30 somethings, a generation frankly that does not typically garner as much attention from feature film as from television. In such, *Montclair* boldly defies a particular set of norms, and the necessity for films which do this, which cater to a specific audience whole-heartedly, is undoubtedly pivotal. Yet this intrepid decision does not allow for a transcendent quality of the cinematic experience. Audiences outside the film's experiential base may well feel an appreciation yet dissociation from the ideas presented. Namely, *Montclair* is not a film for everyone, but for those who willingly embrace it, the promise of poignance and emotional honesty is kept safe and taken to heart.

For more information visit [www.monclairthemovie.com](http://www.monclairthemovie.com).