

# MOOD INDIGO

## Feature Article

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In Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*, Bill Murray's spiritually jet-lagged Bob Harris croons a rendition of Roxy Music's "More Than This" during a karaoke session with Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), the young married woman he meets by chance in the tomblike lounge of the Park Hyatt Tokyo. It's a half zany, half morose moment that doesn't so much complement the piquant melancholy of Coppola's sophomore effort as it does encapsulate the warm glow emanating from art-house cinemas these past few months.

In August, there was *American Splendor*, an experimental docudrama about Everyman file clerk and comic-book artist Harvey Pekar. Then *Lost in Translation* arrived, garnering nearly uniform praise. Friday *The Station Agent*, a somber Sundance prize-winner about three lonely souls who come together at an abandoned train depot in rural New Jersey, pulled into town. And in November comes *The Cooler*, a gambling drama starring William H. Macy that's at once gritty and romantic.

It's becoming clear that indie films are enduring a long night of the soul — with exuberant results. *Lost in Translation* has reaped \$18 million in a little more than a month, while *American Splendor* made more than \$5 million after winning the grand jury prize at Sundance in January.

In a year when many mainstream studio efforts have been box-office disappointments, audiences seem hungry for the bittersweet refrains these smaller films offer, their soulfulness and sense of loss. These films are superbly nuanced, to use a term that has come up again and again in cultural writing this year, consistently avoiding formula and breaking new ground.

*American Splendor* jumps from animation to fiction to real life as actors share screen time with the real Harvey Pekar, his comics, his wife, Joyce, and other peripheral characters, including David Letterman. *The Station Agent* unspools in an economical 88 minutes but packs an emotional wallop. Tom McCarthy's feature debut, which tells the story of Finbar McBride (Peter Dinklage), a shy, unassuming dwarf who inherits an abandoned train depot in rural New Jersey only to discover unlikely friendships with a grieving painter (Patricia Clarkson) and a loquacious hot dog vendor (Bobby Cannavale), is significant for what it leaves out. Quiet is the new loud, it seems to suggest.

"I was interested in paring down the dialogue in terms of exposition and back story, which didn't interest me," says McCarthy during a phone conversation from New York. "I liked the idea of these characters who talk only when they have to, they don't try to teach us or preach to us."

Like Charlotte in *Lost in Translation*, who spends an inordinate amount of time staring out her hotel-room window, the characters in *The Station Agent* — Dinklage and Clarkson at least — are not immune to meditative silence. "We don't have to talk, we can just eat — I'm cool with that," says Clarkson's Olivia during a mealtime scene notable for its subtlety.

“I didn’t set out to write a movie about a dwarf,” insists McCarthy, who began writing *The Station Agent* nearly four years ago after appearing in *Meet the Parents*. “I was more interested in dealing with themes of loneliness, solitude, connection, and community.”

Clarkson signed on after learning that McCarthy had written a character with the actress in mind. She was immediately impressed with the script’s honesty and authenticity. “He’s got a 40-year-old woman right, in many ways,” Clarkson says during a phone conversation from New York. “In all of (Olivia’s) complexities, her struggle, her sense of humor, her physicality, her sexuality, he just got it right.”

The actress also appears in the similarly nuanced *Pieces of April*, directed by Peter Hedges (see accompanying story), a family comedy opening on Friday. In the film, Clarkson plays an acid-tongued wife and mother who’s privately battling breast cancer.

In both subject matter and audience response, it feels like a pivotal moment in movies — a tipping point after a lackluster summer of big-budget Hollywood thrill rides that ranged from lugubrious (*The Hulk*) to epileptic (*Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle*) to unnecessary (*Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*). Add to that an onslaught of bad reality TV and an exhausting parade of overexposed celebrities and their personal dramas, often as stultifyingly dull as their movies. The colossal flop *Gigli* may have sent more than a few Hollywood executives spiraling into their own karaoke renditions of “More Than This.”

Meanwhile, independent films have quietly matured and coalesced into something more attuned to the times we live in. “They’re digging a little deeper,” says actor William H. Macy, whose performance as hapless — and cursed — Las Vegas casino worker Bernie Lootz in *The Cooler* follows in a long line of beautiful loser roles for both Macy and the indie movement. “Indies started off being about fringe elements of society,” Macy adds, during a break in shooting David Mamet’s *Spartan* in Los Angeles. “Now they’re about things people find in their own kitchen or backyards — the mundane things in life.”

The last time so many movies reflected such a profound collective spirit was the late 1960s and early 1970s, when directors created personal, often antiestablishment films such as *Bonnie & Clyde*, *Easy Rider* and *Badlands*, which directly addressed societal concerns.

“The greatest days of filmmaking I experienced was when we thought films could somehow change the world,” says veteran producer Edward R. Pressman, chairman of indie production company ContentFilm and an executive producer of *The Cooler* and *Badlands*, during a phone conversation from New York. “It’s not quite the same now, but the trend is more (evident) than it has been in a long time. Projects that are just staring now are even more connected to the films of the ‘70s — works of individual expression and not packages.”

It’s not difficult to spot a parallel between the strife and uncertainty that marked the ‘60s, and the films that sprang up in their wake, and the soul-searching that pervades the times we live in now. It may be too soon for movies to make the kind of cultural waves that *Easy Rider* did more than 30 years ago, but some of the films we’re now seeing feel durable and important. Paul Giamatti’s performance as Harvey Pekar in *American Splendor* feels every bit as iconic as Jack

Nicholson's in *Five Easy Pieces*, and the cultural echoes are similar; Bill Murray's Oscar-worthy turn as Bob Harris could prove to be just as emblematic of its era.

"The only reason people make these movies is for the right reasons," Clarkson insists. "It might be serendipity that all these bittersweet, melancholic films are coming out together. But I think at the core of independent filmmaking lies a certain amount of soulfulness."

"I don't think it's anything calculated," says Pressman, whose company also produced *The Guys*, the first feature film to incorporate 9/11 into its storyline. "The best filmmakers are somehow connected to their times, their culture, in ways that defy explanation. It's part of the zeitgeist." ■