

# THE INVISIBLE CIRCUS

## SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

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Cameron Diaz is a righteous rump shaker of the highest order, America's second-favorite sweetcheeks after Julia Roberts, but she's no rabble-rousing member of the radical fringe. Every time you try and imagine her blowing up office buildings in Berlin with the Baader-Meinhof Gang, or acid-tripping on some Amsterdam houseboat at the end of the Sixties, you're whisked back to the booty-shaking bravado of her Soul Train appearance in "Charlie's Angels," or else to the hair gel showstopper in "There's Something About Mary," scenes that have established the pert, plucky plum-cheeked actress as the Carole Lombard of her generation. But a Red Army anarchist circa 1970? Not in a million years.

Although her presence is minor in "The Invisible Circus," Adam Brooks' Sundance Centerpiece based on the Jennifer Egan novel, Diaz's dizzy comic timing is sorely out of step with the brooding angst at the heart of this misguided emotional road movie about a young San Francisco woman who wanders Europe in 1977 looking for clues surrounding her big sister's suicide. Granted it was a last-minute addition to the festival (the Jodie Foster-produced "Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys" wasn't ready in time), but it's another cloying example, following Kasi Lemmons' disastrous "Caveman's Valentine," of why Indiewood productions consistently miss the mark, cultivating a groundswell of hype prior to and during the Sundance Film Festival, only to fall flat at the box office a few months later.

This recipe for disaster works like a charm: Adapt a mid-list novel of dubious merit that's redolent of an Oprah's Book Club selection; cast a marquee-value star to ensure foreign sales; court the co-financing and marketing moxie of a mini-major like Fine Line; shoot on a budget that's not quite indie -- but bloated by Hollywood standards -- and watch audiences around the world seethe with indifference until the picture winds up on the airlines, peddled to captive audiences who have no special diet for such movies.

"The Invisible Circus" opens with Diaz dancing on a jetty in Portugal, and knowing the charming klutziness of the popular A-list actress, you expect her to fall right off into the shimmering sea below, which she does. Only it's a suicide. And it leaves Faith O'Connor's younger sister Phoebe (teen pic brooder Jordana Brewster) and divorced mom Gail (Blythe Danner) alienated and devastated seven years later in San Francisco, in their avocado-toned abode that's so Martha Stewart that you wonder which decade we're supposed to be in. Wasn't the Seventies the decade of

brown?

Like "Holy Smoke" and "The Beach," "The Invisible Circus" ponders what happens to those young, restless souls who go wandering by mistake, unearthing the true meaning of life en route after they've slept with dubious individuals, tripped on hallucinogenic drugs and grasped the fact that emotional odysseys can't be limned from crackpot gurus, secret maps or big sisters' postcards. Following high school graduation, wide-eyed, heavy-hearted Phoebe travels to Amsterdam in hopes of retracing her sister's footsteps and gleaning some sort of truth behind free-spirited Faith's cryptic death. Discovering that there's no free love left over from the frisky Sixties -- only free acid, a tab of which is thrust upon her by the wrong kind of hippie -- Phoebe plunders a deceptive terrain, one that's eons away from the rampant possibilities of Faith's free-wheeling generation.

After Euro-railing it down to Paris, Phoebe hooks up with Wolf (Christopher Eccleston), Faith's former radical-chic flame who's now married to Eurotrash and leading what looks to be the life of a modern-day Condé Nast editor with a generous expense account, and another impossibly decorated apartment straight out of the Pottery Barn catalog. (What era was this again?) Like Diaz, Eccleston is all wrong for the part of Wolf, though at least he smacks of some indie credibility. But he's much more convincing as someone who's neurotic and out of control, like the nervous wrecks he played in Michael Winterbottom's "Jude" or Danny Boyle's "Shallow Grave." Here, he's the ultimate Seventies sellout, someone who chose Bryan Ferry over David Bowie.

Soon Phoebe's embarking on a freaky acid trip through the streets of Paris that plays out like some Henry Miller-meets-Helmut Newton street fantasia, replete with cheap whores getting reamed by sleazy flaneurs in Montmartre cul de sacs. Once again, the film astonishes with its imbecilic, schizophrenic flair for period detail and local color.

Phoebe finally gets her revelatory awakening in "The Invisible Circus," after she and Wolf journey all the way down to Portugal in a rental car to the exact location of Faith's fatal leap into the unknown. By this time Phoebe's already slept with Wolf, who's lived up to his name by coughing up new details surrounding Faith's suicide. Greater forces may have led to her death, in the form of an anarchist terrorist group in Berlin called the Red Army, whom Faith aided in a 1970 bombing mission that killed an innocent accountant. Fraught with guilt, disillusioned by the dark legacy of the drug-soaked Sixties, Faith takes her own life because she knows her wide-eyed idealism has become a sinister lie.

All of which prompts Phoebe to utter an obligatory moment straight from Syd Field's screenplay school that transforms "The Invisible Circus" into a history lesson

for stupid people who never paid attention in school: "You guys were reinventing the world every day," the newly enlightened Phoebe tells Wolf. "By the time I got to high school everything was fake!" What Phoebe has ostensibly learned after her exhausting journey to a Portuguese cliff is that the Sixties aren't the Seventies and the anarchic chic of her sister's generation has ceded to something more menacing and manufactured.

What Phoebe should have learned in "The Invisible Circus" was that the fakeness had a name. It was called punk rock. Instead of squandering her money on airfare, she could have waited around in San Francisco until January 14, 1978, brooded on down to the Winterland Ballroom and caught the final show of the Sex Pistols. It would have put everything in perspective for the poor disillusioned mess. Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?

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