

ME AND YOU AND EVERYONE WE KNOW

This year's Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF), with the tagline "Feast Your Eyes," opens with the feature *Me and You and Everyone We Know*. If this film is indicative of what's to come, movie lovers truly are in for a feast over the next several weeks at SIFF. This is the best opening feature I've seen in my three years of covering SIFF, and it speaks to the festival's ongoing commitment to provide thoughtful, challenging and original films.

Me and You is the brainchild of Miranda July, a performance artist who wrote, directed and stars in the film. The film opens with Richard (John Hawkes of HBO's "Deadwood"), a shoe salesman and recently separated father of two, attempting to attract his children's attention away from the computer by covering his hand in lighter fluid and igniting it. This immediately introduces us to a major theme of *Me and You*: the efforts we make to gain others' notice in the hope of creating significant and meaningful connections in an increasingly digital, individualized, and often isolating, world. While Richard's self-immolation may be careless, whimsical and self-destructive, his aspiration for relationship with his children impels him beyond the rational.

We are soon introduced to Christine (Miranda July), an aspiring artist and cab driver whose hope is to have her work shown in the Museum of Contemporary Art's display on connectivity in the digital age. Christine's art is frank and direct: as she films her feet, one labeled "Me" and the other "You," hesitantly and awkwardly touching and retreating in a dance of courtship, we see her longing for relationship humorously yet passionately depicted. Her desire to have her work shown, to have it and thus her acknowledged, again emphasizes the characters' hunger for connection.

From here the plot loops and whirls as characters dance back-and-forth throughout each other's lives. Richard and Christine begin a confused and halting relationship. Richard tries to draw closer to his sons. Two high-school girls and an older man taunt each other with sexual possibility. An elderly couple enjoys their remaining moments together. A young girl opens up her hopes to a teenage boy. Richard tries to create a sense of community amongst his neighbors. A young boy instant-messages with an older woman. The hope is always for connection, for relationship that will last (as the two IM the word "Forever" is persistently and longingly displayed).

One particularly beautiful scene involves Christine and Michael (Hector Elias) watching a plastic-bagged goldfish that has been accidentally left atop a moving car. While attempting to notify the driver, they quickly realize that their efforts to stop the car's progression are ultimately useless: time will march on, the trapped fish will fall from the car, and death will have its say. Their only recourse is to take solace in the unity of their presence: in the face of an impending end there is little else that can be done. The question of the sufficiency of this action for salvation or redemption is not raised; the emphasis rests solely on the necessity of this standing together.

Me and You is July's first full length feature, and she succeeds in creating a conflicted world rife with longing and hope, dancing between the realistic and the surreal. This aspect is most clearly seen in the language employed, which is simple, open and candid, lacking the protections and facades of ordinary speech. Real people certainly do feel this alone, and yet very rarely do real people speak this directly about it. This device serves to make the characters simultaneously accessible and distant, and enables us to

effectively relate to them while also maintaining sufficient distance for us to have compassion for them.

July has created a world of quirky characters whose idiosyncrasies lighten the dramatic weight and provide plenty of comedic relief. However, once the laughter fades (and even sometimes in the midst of it), we realize that these peculiarities are manifestations of visceral fears, hopes and needs. July has succeeded in creating comically tragic characters, an outstanding feat not easily attained. One can only hope audiences do not forgo the tragic depth for the simple laugh. While there are occasions when her imagery and emphases are too direct and lack complexity, these slight faults are easily overlooked given the charm and passion of the film's entirety.

As director, July elicits wonderful performances from the entire cast. Particularly noteworthy are the performances given by children and teens, most especially Brandon Ratcliff in the role of Robby, Richard's youngest son. And there's something alluring in both July's and Hawkes' eyes: big and watery, as if at any moment they were to give way to tears, whether from pain, alienation, unfulfilled desire or the mysterious connections they surprisingly form. The film's quirky humor reminded me at times of *Garden State*, but where *Garden State* failed to deliver emotionally, *Me and You* poignantly succeeds and provides a depth that bears closer resemblance to the works of Wes Anderson (*Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*) and P.T. Anderson (*Magnolia*, *Punch Drunk Love*). The trouble with films such as these is that their lack of MESSAGE! enables probing viewers to read nearly anything into them; the success and beauty of these films ultimately rests in this same freedom from certainty.

Me and You most likely will not receive the money and marketing – and thus distribution – of other major summer films, though it would easily compete with the best of them. I can only hope that it finds its way beyond the festival circuit and into theaters. This is a true gem of a film that's too good for you not to see.