

HAPPY ENDINGS: The post-nuclear family according to Don Roos

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Don Roos is a clever guy. You can tell by the way that, with his new film *Happy Endings*, he's stopped worrying and learned to love his web browser, connecting one scene to the next through happenstance and linking text. It's all very Google meets Robert Altman. In fact, *Happy Endings* could serve as proof for the currently fashionable theory that we shouldn't worry that our web-based, video-game-loving culture is dumbing us down. Watching *Happy Endings* you too can conclude, as some of our brightest young pundits have, that multitask entertainment actually makes us sharper. If this is true, the new genre *Happy Endings* belongs to—hyperlink cinema—could be the most enhancing of all. *Happy Endings*, which Roos also scripted, joins his *The Opposite of Sex* (98) in the hyperlink canon, alongside the likes of *Magnolia*, *Time Code*, and, most recently, *Crash* (with a special mention for tv's 24). Of them all, *Happy Endings* is best in show.

Some of this post-web film's click-here-we-want-your-eyeballs gimmicks are actually profound (in a glib sort of way, of course). Roos favors one device in particular: captions underneath or alongside a split-screen image. At the start of the film the words "She's not dead" accompany the image of a woman who's been hit by a car and lies broken and bloody on the road. Later, when Frank, a middle-aged widower, has an affair with Jude, a lubricious grifter half his age, their lovemaking is annotated: "He will have sex with just two more [women] past Jude. In the last week of his life a nurse will remind him of Jude, and she will think his smiles are for her." These cinematic footnotes are neither postmodern pom-poms nor perversely interjected spoilers. Rather, they give us information in a way that reflects our mental processing. After all, how often in "real life" do we hear the end of a story first or see it unfold

while a third party explains the beginning to us? And how frequently do we wonder more about how a present situation will resolve itself 20 years hence than how it will turn out next week? The footnotes accompanying certain images cater to these and other information-processing proclivities, making viewers feel that their minds have been, well, understood. Happy Endings anticipates what viewers want to know about a given moment and fills them in before they even realize what they wanted. By preempting the audience's narrative desire, Roos speaks to it directly.

Like many other multitasking web-inflected films, Happy Endings is set in Los Angeles. But its lush, bright look departs from the grim neo-noir-morbid L.A. we've grown accustomed to at the movies, evoking a sense of fertility and, as Roos put it during our interview, "a Garden of Eden feel." Like *Magnolia* and *Crash*, as well as more conventional Los Angeles-traversing narratives like *Collateral*, Happy Endings is predicated on the feeling generated by the act of de-repressing the city, foregrounding it instead of using it as an anonymous, generic backdrop. Roos plays up the L.A.-ness of L.A., but what results isn't a teeming melting pot, à la *Crash*. It's "about fluid, about pools, lotions, and semen," Roos says, with glorious precision. "I am fascinated by the idea of fluids and fluidity."

In its Age of Adderall mindset, its Los Angeles setting, and its own affinity for liquidity, *Magnolia* might be Happy Endings's clearest antecedent. Thankfully, though, Roos avoids P.T. Anderson's dime-store eschatology, cokehead metaphysics, and amphibian rain shower. Roos professes to be a bigger fan of 24 and the stoned modernism of Robert Altman—*Short Cuts* and Altman protégé Alan Rudolph's *Welcome to L.A.* are obvious forerunners. Like Altman and Rudolph, Roos is dependent on actors acting: playing ugly, singing improbably, or unexpectedly appearing nude, with the great and famous playing small parts and the has-beens playing leads. But he takes the baggy plotting of the Altman picaresque into web

territory: in *Happy Endings* playing games with time and personal history are a given, and there are more plot twists than at the John Bolton hearings.

The film starts off with sour, dowdy Mamie (Lisa Kudrow)—who, as a teenager, gave up for adoption a child she had by her gay stepbrother—encountering inept aspiring filmmaker Nicky (Jesse Bradford) who claims to know her now-grown son and tries to blackmail her into participating in an exploitative documentary about their reunion. Mamie manages to divert Nicky's creative interest into making a film about her lover Javier (Bobby Cannavale), a Mexican massage-therapist-cum-gigolo. At the same time, Mamie's stepbrother, restaurant manager Charley (Steve Coogan), has become obsessed with the suspicion that his boyfriend Gil (David Sutcliffe) is the biological father of a lesbian couple's toddler. And it's at Charley's restaurant that Jude (Maggie Gyllenhaal), a karaoke-singing opportunist looking for a place to crash, meets one of its employees, Otis (Jason Ritter), a talent-free drummer. Otis is gay and hasn't come out to his father, but he sleeps with Jude anyway. Otis's father Frank (an ineluctably transcendent Tom Arnold) then falls in love with Jude.

Like all hyperlink films, *Happy Endings* toggles back and forth between its ending and beginning (three interwoven storylines track the destinies of 10 characters in all). When we're given information about a character's fate, the action then clicks back to fill in the missing pieces. Letting the air out of audience story anxiety, it is, to paraphrase the title of Roos's first film, the *Opposite of Narrative*. There were few signs of such manic storytelling originality and almost blog-like sensibility in the 50-year-old director's earlier screenwriting, even though the road movie, with its "fluid" properties, has always been his favorite genre. In the Nineties, Roos scripted several, including *Love Field* (92), which tracked a frenzied bleach-blonde Jackie Kennedy obsessive (Michelle Pfeiffer) on a cross-country bus ride to JFK's funeral,

and *Boys on the Side* (95), in which three women (Whoopi Goldberg, Mary-Louise Parker, and Drew Barrymore) hit the road in a bid to escape their pasts and, in the case of Parker, her walled-off life as a woman with AIDS. Roos's first directorial effort was the knowing, punchy *The Opposite of Sex* (98), wherein luscious, bobble-headed teen trollop Dede Truitt (Christina Ricci) takes a number of extended trips. She first takes off after the death of her stepfather; later, having seduced her stepbrother's gay lover, she heads out again with the new boyfriend in tow, who's under the impression that he has impregnated her.

The Opposite of Sex was a Sundance darling and for good reason. There was a serrated cleverness to its dialogue ("I don't have a heart of gold and I don't grow one later, okay? But relax. There's other people a lot nicer coming up—we call them losers," Dede confides to the audience, anticipating the premonitory captions of *Happy Endings*). The film had a bunch of similarly bratty assets: Ricci and an acerbic Lisa Kudrow, and a mock-homicidal hatred of the nuclear family (remember when a mock-homicidal hatred of the family was an indie-film prerequisite?). In *The Opposite of Sex*, the family is a twisted thing, but no more so than Roos's nonnuclear menages. Nevertheless, his films always let us know that our best hope lies in the families we make as opposed to the ones we're born into.

Roos's debut earned him the chance to direct the \$35 million *Bounce* (00) from his own script. Its premise contains a pair of Roos fundamentals: an offscreen death that triggers a strange new romance and a toxic falsehood at that romance's root. Unfortunately, the film, starring Ben Affleck and Gwyneth Paltrow when they were still a celebrity couple, became an overfed paint-by-numbers tearjerker.

"After feeling like I had taken off my clothes with *The Opposite of Sex*, I wrote a straight film that was meant to be directed by someone else," says Roos. "No one wanted to direct it. Initially, it was an uneasy picture, but then they tested it in New Jersey. As a result, they went and made it more middle class. Initially, the main character was unlikable, and you felt unsafe about the two leads ending up

together, but then they made the Affleck character less unpleasant. Today I like it for its performances, but I am not a fan of the film.” Roos swears he will never make a movie like it again. “I can’t work in a system where my job is not to offend people,” he says. “The trick is to make a film for so little money nobody cares. Then you don’t have to do an audience test. I’ll never test a film ever, ever again.”

And so, in sharp contrast to *Bounce*, *Happy Endings* cost only \$5 million. As well as returning to a smaller scale and the creative freedom that goes with it, the film also revisits the same moral landscape as *The Opposite of Sex*: both movies seem heavily defined by notions of original sin and aids-as-metaphor. At the beginning of both, the important deaths have already taken place. And, in both films, the outcomes of all sexual acts are narrative pivots. What matters is what can be transmitted through these acts: emotion, identity, and dna, rather than disease. Indeed, all three of *Happy Endings*’s storylines involve pregnancy and a gay father. Each outcome suggests the highly variable permutations that the act of intercourse can produce. One pregnancy storyline combines gay patrimony and adoption. Another, in which a wife-to-be almost gives birth to her fiancé’s grandson, is narrowly averted.

Roos is more comfortable talking about his film in terms of sexuality than gay parenthood, although he admits that he and his male partner recently adopted a child and that the film probably enabled him to work out some of his own issues. “*Happy Endings* is about the strangeness of sex,” says Roos. “It’s about the inability to accept ourselves as sexual people and the transmission of consciousness through sex—that through sex you can give birth to another consciousness. When the characters unite it is like original sin: two people who shouldn’t be together getting together. They then need to be forgiven.”

Happy Endings’s various original sin narratives, in which action multiplies like reproducing cells, echo the way information proliferates on the web. If Roos and other hyperlink directors keep going, hyperlink cinema might end up being the new Hollywood we’ve been waiting for. *Zola*, *Six Feet Under*, and a search engine all rolled into one: what could be better?

The narrative cleverness of the film may borrow something from popular technology. But *Happy Endings* nevertheless gets at something very human, traversing from one state of unfulfillable yearning to another, from one replacement child to another, from a gold-digging grifter to a blackmailer, from resentful gay parents to bad straight relationships, from the film's self-reflexivity to a docudrama-within-the-film.

The best thing about *Happy Endings* is that, like hyperlinking itself, it's irremediably relativist. Information, character, and action co-exist without hierarchy. And we are always one click away from a new life, a new story, and new meaning, all equally captivating but no better or worse than what we have just left behind.