



Hall and Sudeikis at the peace table



MIXING IT UP DOWN EAST

Jason Sudeikis and Rebecca Hall warm an indie movie that goes down like a hot toddy. By Ben Dickinson

The eve of the Oscars is the quietest time of the cinematic year, so we're lucky this month to have *Tumbledown* to keep us company, a feature that's comedic and romantic but adds up to something more than a straight-up rom-com. It's the kind of indie project that has clearly led something of a charmed life on its years-long way to the screen, as so many of its key elements appear to have fallen into place by serendipity. Written by Desiree Van Til and directed by Sean Mewshaw—a husband-and-wife pair of

émigrés from Tinseltown who settled in Van Til's native Farmington, Maine, some years ago—*Tumbledown* is locally set and incorporates various personae and scenery familiar to Van Til. *Tumbledown*'s first impressive feat is dodging a huge sinkhole that could have swallowed it whole from the get-go. By now, we're all too familiar with the fetishizing cultishness that arises upon the demise of Promising Young Artists; Hannah Miles (the criminally underemployed Rebecca Hall—on the evidence here, she should be getting a *lot* more juicy lead roles), who has survived the untimely death of her folkie singer-songwriter husband, Hunter, has to deal with this cultural affliction on a regular basis, in a small town no less—as often as not with eyes rolling in exasperation. Hall's spirited

portrayal of Hannah's earthy, conflicted attempts to move on with her life crucially steers clear of mawkishness and (for the most part) morbid preoccupation.

Andrew McCabe (Jason Sudeikis), an ambitious young pop-culture and American studies prof, shows up in town and signals that he gets how annoying the creepy cult thing is by somewhat dismissively name-checking Nick Drake, Jeff Buckley, David Foster Wallace, and Kurt Cobain when he meets Hannah. But that doesn't resolve the tension between them: Hannah is dead set on writing Hunter's biography; McCabe, delivering a hilarious impromptu slab of academic malarkey, contends that he should be the one to immortalize Hunter's place in the pop pantheon. Their ensuing minuet of

competition and cooperation drives the story along smartly—and Sudeikis is wonderfully served here, as his McCabe memorably mixes smart-alecky snark and reasonably well-camouflaged sensitivity.

Around these characters is a cluster of strong supporting players: a musky, moody Joe Manganiello as the semi-articulate rustic guy who's not above letting Hannah use him for some much-needed carnal comforting; Blythe Danner as the radiant, ever-hopeful matriarch who just wants her Hannah to be happy; Dianna Agron as McCabe's smug, citified squeeze; and, maybe best of all, a shambling Griffin Dunne as the town bookseller and puckish busybody.

The narrative is given enormous verisimilitude by two canny elements: short recitatives from McCabe's musings about Hunter Miles that are persuasively heartfelt; and, even more affecting, the scraps of song contributed to the film score by Damien Jurado, a veteran of Seattle's indie-folk scene. They pack a wistful, Neil Youngish wallop that perfectly fits the movie's mood. It all tends to stick with you—more than just a little bit. ●

DIRECTOR'S SPOTLIGHT

MAD FOR EACH OTHER

A vivid drama about being bipolar is the fruit of a young director's excruciating experience

Touched With Fire—named after Kay Redfield Jamison's book about bipolar disorder and creativity, which helped director Paul Dalio turn his life around—originated as his NYU film school project under the tutelage of Spike Lee and was seen through production by his mentor's 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks. It's *that* good!

But before that, Dalio, now 36, went through years of psychological hell that inform every frame of his debut feature. In it, Carla (Katie Holmes, in a bracingly convincing performance) and Marco (a preternaturally intense Luke Kirby) meet in a psychiatric hospital, bond over poetry writing, and become each other's dream enablers—which

seems unlikely to end well. If that setup sounds trite or twee, well, fasten your seat belt. Dalio's script and direction, and the marvelously evocative score he composed for the film as well, are all of a caliber that easily takes us far beyond movie-of-the-week territory. Christine Lahti and Griffin Dunne (again—see opposite page) lend key gravitas as respective concerned parents of the duo.

As Dalio sees it, the film and the couple's manic mutual inspiration function as “kind of a metaphor for my own experience. When you first get the disorder, you start out feeling a little bit high.” Then things tend to go south in a big way. For Dalio, it happened while he was staying at the Standard Hotel in Hollywood. When he snapped (“like a lightning bolt to my head!”), he spent two months in a psychiatric hospital getting a handle on his condition. His long climb back to a self-sustaining and productive way of life was foggy and grueling; he felt poisoned by his DNA and permanently exiled from the Land of the Happy.

“I kept asking my doctor,” Dalio recalls, “Just introduce me to *one person* who's happy—who's bipolar, and on medication, and creative, and will give me some hope—because at this point, I don't have any. I don't see a living example.” His doctor happened to know Jamison: Their meeting was life-changing, and she ended up making a personal appearance in a key scene of the movie. “I wrote her into it without telling her,” Dalio says. “I wasn't even planning on having her play herself. It was her husband who offered her up right off the bat. And that was *huge*.”

Go see for yourself. —B.D.



Director Paul Dalio (left) on set; Holmes and Kirby (below)



MOVIES

TRUST US



MIXED DOUBLES

Not your mother's—or even your big sister's—chick flick, *How to Be Single* serves up a posse of randy women, as Rebel Wilson's professional party girl instructs a newly unattached friend (Dakota Johnson) on up-to-the-minute, uh, dating etiquette, while another swingle (Alison Brie) tries on an actual relationship. As ever, Leslie Mann steals the show as a soulful older sister.



CUBAN CONUNDRUM

Surely the most improbable (but entirely justified!) Irish entry ever for best foreign-language Oscar, *Viva* gorgeously and poetically immerses us in the repressed and besieged drag-queen demimonde of Havana, Cuba, where a lonely boy (Héctor Medina) has to face down the homophobic rage of his father (Jorge Perugorria) in order to find his own version of freedom.



TWO-WAY STREET

When the elite, private Avenues: The World School opened across the street from the Elliot Houses projects in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood, Marc Levin saw a perfect illustration of today's mind-boggling inequalities. His HBO documentary, *Class Divide*, shows how youths on both sides of the street have reached across the gap in outcomes, looking for connection. —B.D.

Opposite page: Courtesy of Starz Digital (2); This page, clockwise from top right: Barry Weicher, courtesy of Magnolia Pictures; HBO; Joey Kuhn (2)