

# Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Ghost World*

USA, 2000. R. 111 min

**Cast:** Thora Birch, Scarlett Johansson, Steve Buscemi, Brad Renfro; **Writers:** Daniel Clowes, Terry Zwigoff; **Music:** Skip James; **Cinematographer:** Affonso Beato; **Producer:** Pippa Cross, Janette Day, Michael Shamber; **Director:** Terry Zwigoff

(Steve Buscemi), a lonely, borderline creepy, middle-aged vintage jazz and blues record collector whom Enid initially plays a prank on, and then unexpectedly befriends (she says to Rebecca: "He's the exact opposite of everything I really hate. In a way, he's such a clueless dork, he's almost kind of cool."). In Seymour, Enid finds a kindred spirit of sorts, but by the film's bittersweet but stirring conclusion, her friendships with him and Rebecca irrevocably change.

The film is based on Daniel Clowes' cult comic book of the same name, and he adapted it



for the screen with director Terry Zwigoff. Clowes initially came across the words "Ghost World" as graffiti on a garage and thought they had a "poetic, evocative quality". On the surface, the story is a coming of age tale, but it's just as much a provocative satire and a searing lament for a vanishing culture. "The America we live in is disappearing, bulldozed under our feet and constantly rehabbed and remodeled," says Clowes. Zwigoff adds that *Ghost World* views America as "just one big happy corporate strip mall" where Enid's dilemma is "to find something to connect with in this modern monoculture." To set her and Seymour apart, Zwigoff purposely filled the film with a lot of extras and

incidental characters that resemble "glum, bland, modern slobs and schmucks."

Previously known for the documentary *Crumb*, Zwigoff never intended to make yet another comic book related film. That was, until his wife showed him a copy of Clowes' comic. Intrigued, Zwigoff contacted Clowes. Their adaptation was faithful to the comic, retaining much of its dialogue, and, in the finished film, the look of the characters, but they also made a few changes. In the original comic, Roberta didn't appear at all and Seymour was only a very minor character. In many ways, as rendered in the film, Seymour could nearly be a stand-in for Zwigoff, as both character and director resemble each other physically and share a passion for collecting old records.

Although it wasn't a huge commercial hit, the film immediately achieved cult-classic status, thanks to a sharp, splendidly original, Oscar-nominated script (Enid, at a graduation party: "This is so bad it's gone past good and back to bad again.") and the pitch-perfect casting of Birch, Johansson, Douglas and especially Buscemi; he won accolades (among them, an Independent Spirit Award and Best Supporting Actor from The National Society of Film Critics) for what is arguably his funniest and most touching performance to date. With that in mind, *Ghost World* is the rare film that is as amusing as it is poignant, and it absolutely nails what it's like to be eighteen and struggling to find comfort in a changing world.

Few movies about an eighteen-year-old girl open with a frenzied musical number from a 1960's Indian flick, but *Ghost World* is not your average coming of age film. Neither is its quirky, sardonic, thorny protagonist, Enid (Thora Birch). As the film's first minute cuts between the Indian film and apartment window shots of decidedly middle class Americans going about their daily routines (a homage to *Rear Window*?), we eventually come to Enid. As she thrashes about in her trademark funky black-rimmed spectacles, her bedroom television set is revealed as the source of the Indian film, *Gumnaam*. Immediately, we get a sense of her unique taste, her fascination with the kitschy, unusual, and out-of-date.

*Ghost World* follows Enid and her best friend Rebecca (Scarlett Johansson) in the weeks after their high school graduation. Neither of them are going to college; instead, they plan to find low-paying retail jobs, get an apartment together, hang out at faux '50s diners and convenience stores, and marvel at all the eccentric citizens of their nondescript, mini-mall and chain store populated town. One kink in these plans comes in the form of a remedial art class Enid must take in order to hang on to her diploma, which is taught by the hilariously pretentious Roberta (Illeana Douglas). Another reveals itself as Seymour

- Written by Chris Kriofske