

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: Punch Drunk Love

USA, 2002. Rated R. 95 min

Cast: Adam Sandler, Emily Watson, Luis Guzman, Phillip Seymour Hoffman;
Writer: Paul Thomas Anderson;
Cinematography: Robert Elswit;
Music: Jon Brion; **Producer:** Paul Thomas Anderson, Daniel Lupi, Joanne Sellar; **Director:** Paul Thomas Anderson

Paul Thomas Anderson's 1999 opus, *Magnolia*, proved what everyone already suspected about the writer/director.

For Anderson's fans, *Magnolia* – with its abundance of emotion, subplots, twists of fate, desperate characters, dying fathers, and almost everything else – was the payoff on the promise of his first features, *Hard Eight* (1996) and *Boogie Nights* (1997). Those who loved *Magnolia* (and there is no midpoint of feeling where the film is concerned) responded, at least in part, to the film's unabashed sincerity, its willingness to risk absurdity in the pursuit of true feeling. This bravery proved for many Anderson's artistic integrity, and vaulted him into the elite of young directors.

However, for his detractors – who had already caught the faint whiff of self-indulgence in his other films – this excess proved Anderson's unrestrained weakness for rambling emotionalism. Anderson, *Magnolia* proved to some, was willing to put his audience through whatever interminable narrative contortions his fertile imagination happened to disgorge, regardless of the obviousness of the points being made.

Then along came PUNCH DRUNK LOVE, at once a mark of Anderson's evolution as an artist, and a confirmation of all his best qualities as a filmmaker.

PUNCH DRUNK LOVE tells the story of Barry Egan (Sandler), a lonely wholesaler of bathroom equipment working out of a small warehouse in the San Fernando Valley. Barry has two major problems. He is, first and most importantly, profoundly alone.

Burdened with a gaggle of nagging sisters, he bears the scars of a lifetime of emotional abuse, vacillating between mumbling detachment and bursts of rage and violence. Barry's second problem is a result of the first. In a moment of particularly acute longing, he has called a phone sex number and injudiciously given his name, address, and credit card information. He is now the target of extortionists: the sleazy Dean (the peerless Hoffman, returning for his fourth Anderson film) and the three hooligans he's sent to shake Barry down.

In the midst of all this, Barry has, almost against his will, found love with the gentle Lena (Watson), a work



friend of one of Barry's less caustic sisters. Despite several attempts at dodging Lena's advances, Barry has begun to understand the value of this simple human relationship, and the difference that tenderness and warmth can make in his life. He has, in short (and with a sincerity and simplicity that perhaps is unique to Anderson among his contemporaries), begun to suspect that love can change his world.

While there are many familiar Andersonian touches in PUNCH DRUNK LOVE (sudden and inexplicable workings of chance, surreal humor, violent peril that lurks beneath California's placid surface) it also marks a significant departure from his previous work. Anderson has minimized the constant swooping and gliding of the camera that has occasionally made him seem like a shameless Scorsese. Instead, the film has a stillness and simplicity that under-

scores Barry's plight and makes the explosive scenes of violence and action all the more effective. Also gone is Anderson's ambitious plotting and scope. PUNCH DRUNK LOVE is Barry's film, without distraction or mistake (Sandler is in almost every scene). Rather than create a web of human struggle and pain, with multiple plots overlapping in theme and tone, Anderson presents a lean story that brings its points home with tremendous effect.

In casting Adam Sandler as Barry, Anderson has shown his usual knack for exploiting actors' most essential qualities. Where Anderson gave dimension to Mark Wahlberg's beefcake presence in *Boogie Nights*, and in *Magnolia* showed the yawning chasm of emotional despair we suspect has been at the heart of all Tom Cruise's characters, here Anderson has taught us the secret to the brutish man-child Sandler has repeatedly played. In movies like *Billy Madison* (1995) and *Happy Gilmore* (1996), Sandler's puerile behavior is meant to illustrate his roguish charm; here, it is presented as a fault, a symptom of his affliction and an obstacle to his happiness. Although Sandler gives a subtle, effective performance, it is Anderson who, by showing us the pain that would inevitably be the cause of such behavior, has created one of the most sympathetic sociopaths since King Kong.

But PUNCH DRUNK LOVE is, first and foremost, a love story – an overwhelmingly gentle and kind-hearted love story. Anderson has some fun tinkering with the conventions of the genre (watch especially for Barry and Lena's first kiss, the momentum of which is comically broken by Barry's inability to find his way to Lena through a bland apartment building's labyrinth of identical hallways and doors), but nothing detracts from the film's purity of intention. Ultimately, the message of the film could be the message of Anderson's entire career. It is not a novel message, but in an age of irony, Anderson has bravely found a way to say it: love matters most.

– Lawrence Fahey