

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: The Sleepy Time Gal

USA, 2001. Unrated. 95 min

Cast: Jacqueline Bisset, Martha Plimpton, Nick Stahl, Seymour Cassel, Amy Madigan, Frankie Faison, Justin Theroux; **Writer:** Christopher Munch; **Cinematographer:** Rob Sweeney; **Producers:** Ruth Charney, Jim McCay, Christopher Munch, Michael Stipe; **Director:** Christopher Munch;

Set in the early 1980's, *THE SLEEPY TIME GAL* focuses on two women: Frances (Bisset), in her fifties and recently diagnosed with cancer; and Rebecca (Plimpton), the daughter she gave up for adoption over twenty-five years ago. Since Rebecca's birth, neither woman has seen each other. As Frances' impending death moves her to examine and reflect on her past and the decisions she's made regarding Rebecca and her own life, Rebecca's curiosity about the identity of her birth parents deepens. If this sounds like something out of an average made-for-television movie, rest assured that in director Christopher Munch's hands, *THE SLEEPY TIME GAL* is a solemn, poetic, and subtly unpredictable work.

Frances has led a somewhat funorthodox life. In addition to Rebecca, she has had two sons whom she kept, and has been divorced twice. Sardonic, stubborn, and a little pushy, she has drifted, from radio personality to zealous volunteer worker to freelance writer. Yet this state of flux is vital to her; she confides to her younger son, Morgan (Stahl), a budding photographer, that she regrets having ever raised him in a safe, controlled, suburban environment. Her sudden, terminal diagnosis comes early in the film. Initially brash and defiant, she soon senses a need to tie up some of her life's dangling, loose ends. She travels from her home in San Francisco to rural Pennsylvania to visit Bob (Cassel), an old flame she hasn't seen in decades. She also starts to think more about Rebecca, wanting to

see her while she still can. Meanwhile, Rebecca is now a young successful lawyer in New York City. Having just ended a long term relationship with her lover (Theroux), she's searching for that sense of reckless abandon that colors Frances' life but is sorely lacking from her more structured, seventy hour work week. As Frances visits Bob, Rebecca takes a business trip to Daytona Beach, Florida to preside over the acquisition of a local radio station by a massive media conglomerate. Daytona Beach is also her birthplace, and her presence there inspires her to find out more about her birth parents. In a startling coincidence, she unknowingly uncovers a clue about her mother



from Jimmy Dupree (Faison), a manager and former disc jockey at the radio station.

Bisset and Plimpton both radiate in challenging, fully fleshed-out roles and contribute appropriately nuanced performances. Bisset expertly brings out both the overpowering and softer, more vulnerable facets of Frances' personality, particularly in her scenes with Stahl. The mother-son bond here is never contrived or precocious. There's a comfort fighting at odds with the tension of things left unsaid in their conversations; despite their proximity and frankness, much lies waiting in each person for the other to discover. Frances' eventual death lingers from the moment of her diagnosis and eventually starts to break down her willfulness, revealing both

regret and a quiet acceptance of things to come. In contrast, though striving to discover who her birth parents are, Plimpton's character is less concerned with examining her past and more with pondering her future. She struggles to balance her professional ethics with her own personal feelings about the demise of the radio station and the effect it will have on Dupree. She grapples with how much she really wants to know about her parents, and what such knowledge will actually bring her. Throughout, Plimpton is admirably direct and down-to-earth, and when she unexpectedly embarks on a short-term romance in Florida, she delightfully surprises both us and herself.

This autumnal, gorgeously shot gem is Munch's third film, following *The Hours and Times* and *Color of a Brisk and Leaping Day*. It garnered acclaim at its premiere at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, but was criminally ignored by distributors. Munch, who also co-produced, wrote, and edited the film, decided to distribute it himself. Although a few airings on the Sundance Channel preceded its theatrical run, *THE SLEEPY TIME GAL* cries out to be seen on the big screen. Munch bestows stunning attention and care to his settings – especially the expansive, rolling hills of the Pennsylvania countryside. He also uses eloquent, silhouetted landscapes and scenes centered on bridges as motifs. The bridges are a fitting link between Frances and Rebecca, whose lives parallel but never intersect, especially when Munch memorably cuts from the Golden Gate Bridge (which Frances travels over) to the Brooklyn Bridge, which Rebecca views from afar. Muted and melancholic but never tear-jerking or maudlin, *THE SLEEPY TIME GAL* is a thoughtful, elegiac tale that affirms Munch's place as one of the most lyrical and truly independent American filmmakers.

– Chris Kriofske