

SUNDANCE REVIEWS

activist coalition Nader helped form. Once he'd decided that the Clinton-era Democrats were essentially another face of the same corporate hydra he'd fought in such fabled battles as the one over putting airbags and seatbelts into cars, Nader's fierce energy and dogged persistence shifted from Democratic asset to political liability, with the fellow-traveler suddenly becoming the face of a liberal opposition movement that had a startling impact, especially on the young.

Clips from Nader's long career help define the scale of his achievements, though the extreme length of this documentary, which seems intended for a two-part presentation on television, actually dilutes his accomplishments more than a tighter and more focused presentation would have. Still, "An Unreasonable Man" should emerge as a significant artifact in documenting the contributions of a man whose very purity of purpose has made him a unique constant in the ebbing and flowing river of muck that is the politics of his time.—*Ray Greene*

A GUIDE TO RECOGNIZING YOUR SAINTS ★★★★★

Starring Robert Downey Jr., Shia La Beouf, Rosario Dawson, Chazz Palminteri and Dianne Wiest. Directed and written by Dito Montiel. Produced by Trudie Styler, Travis Swords, Charlie Corwin and Clara Markowicz. No distributor set. Drama. Not yet rated. Running time: 90 min.

If John Cassavetes had made coming-of-age stories, they might have turned out a lot like first-time writer/director Dito Montiel's "A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints." Developed at Sundance in workshop form from Montiel's autobiographical memoir of the same name and acted by a rich ensemble cast, this is loose, episodic material, unified mostly by Montiel's obvious affection for the lost world it replicates and by the remorse he expresses through the addition of a modern plotline featuring Robert Downey Jr. as Dito at middle-age.

The heart of this story is in the long-ago past, though, where young Dito (Shia La Beouf) and his ragged teenage friends are growing up wild in Astoria, Queens. Young Dito's life is defined by three things: a difficult relationship with his garrulous but stifling father (Chazz Palminteri); the blandly accepting love of his long-suffering mother (Dianne Wiest); and a growing wariness toward Antonio, the brutish, abused kid who views the Montiels as a surrogate family.

Like many a young artist before him, Dito hears the call of greater things, and the sorrow at the center of his predicament is that he can't reach for the moon

from the place he's standing. There are real as well as spiritual threats to confront; a plot thread involving Dito's inadvertent and escalating problems with a local street gang gradually emerges as "Saints'" major dramatic propellant. But street violence is mostly a symptom of what Dito ultimately has to leave behind him: the crumpled and perhaps lethal aspects of a world measured in city blocks, and the suffocating narrowness of a community where even a whimsical subway ride from Queens to Manhattan is viewed with suspicion as a betrayal of kind and class.

Montiel knows this material like his own skin, and it shows in the nervy energy he gives to every frame, especially those of the childhood material. The characters strut and preen as if listening to unheard music, and even the least of them is cast and directed with such raw economy and specificity that whole worlds of experience are suggested in just the way they shrug or smile or glance away from each other when they talk. The noisy overlapping conversations, the manic love/hate polarities defining fathers, sons, lovers and friends, it all feels lived, and the performances are unwaveringly true.

Wiest and Palminteri in particular are in absolute peak form and deserve Oscar nominations for their heart-rending embodiments of Dito's well-meaning but uncomprehending parents. Palminteri's long war against being typecast as a mafia goombahs ends in permanent victory here with a raw, uncompromising enactment of a blue-collar man shaking and bear-hugging his son as if he could make love spill out of him like lost change from a broken candy machine. Wiest tears at the heart with gentler tools, as when, in a first face-to-face conversation with her son in over 20 years, she smiles with guileless pleasure and says, "It's so good to say your name again," and then adds offhandedly, "to you," encompassing two decades of loss and longing and a lifetime of forgiveness in the way she says just two simple words.

There are structural issues with the plot, the pop music score is both random and completely out of period, and Downey, though his usual proficient self, is perhaps too urbane a player to fully convince as the grown-up Dito. But these are small quibbles given how well Montiel has etched a time, a place and the people within it. Like James Joyce's Ireland, Dito's Queens is so vivid yet so confining that we understand both why Dito had to leave it, and why he'll probably never write anything nearly as meaningful about anyplace else.—*Ray Greene*

STEEL CITY ★★1/2

Starring John Heard and Tom Guiry. Directed and written by Brian Jun. Produced by Brian Jun and Ryan Harper. No distributor set. Drama. Not yet rated. Running time: 95 min.

"Heartfelt" was in at Sundance 2006, and this fugue on masculine identity and forgiveness fit the trend. A coming-of-age story focusing on PJ (Tom Guiry), a 20ish restaurant worker whose father (John Heard) has just been imprisoned awaiting trial on a charge of vehicular manslaughter, "Steel City" yearns to show the sensitive side of blue-collar males. The visual backdrops are believable. The action in the foreground, well, that's another story.

Shorthand flashbacks show Dad deserting his family when PJ and his rough-and-tumble brother Ben (Clayne Crawford) were just children, which seems to be all the explanation "Steel City" is willing to offer for pretty much every action taken by the majority of its main characters. Ben, who works at the local steel mill, is cheating on his wife, in the process betraying his newborn daughter and repeating his father's mistakes. Dad is trying to undo the hurt he caused in the past by transforming himself into a good father, even while behind bars. Meanwhile, PJ is lost and flailing, until he moves in with his tough ex-military uncle Vic (a grizzled Raymond J. Barry), a hardass with a heart of gold.

But then, everybody in "Steel City" has a heart of gold beneath their prickly exteriors, and despite excellent performances from Crawford and Barry, these touchy-feely crybabies are about as blue collar as Spongebob Squarepants. Much soap opera-ish dialogue and a lot of arguments of the "Don't do the things I did!" and "I don't want to end up like you!" variety ensue, designed to provide surface drama where there isn't all that much at stake underneath. Both Guiry and Heard are far too upscale in appearance and pronunciation to play Steelville townies, which is a pretty critical flaw considering how heavily "Steel City" relies on local color for its dramatic effects.

There's a moment of truth early on that shows how fraudulent the rest of the film is. PJ is working on a construction site at a new job Vic got for him. He's smoking a cigarette with two co-workers—potbellied hardhats with flushed faces and casually racist attitudes that ring so startlingly and disturbingly true it's as if somebody has just opened a window onto another planet. Then "Steel City" cuts to its next scene, and we lose site of that alien world forever. Too bad it's the very location this film pretends to have a map to.—*Ray Greene*