

## Document Citation

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Author(s)	Ken Eisner
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# ABOVE FREEZING

(COMEDY)

A Cooler Pictures production. Produced by Dolly Hall, Robert Fernandez. Executive producers, John Kamen, Frank Scherma. Co-producer, Alex Corven.

Directed, written by Frank Todaro. Camera (color), Joe DeSalvo; editor, Thom Zimny; music, Ray Loewy; production designer, Stacy Tanner; costume designer, Catherine Thomas; associate producer, Lori E. Seid; assistant director, Michael Johnson; casting, Gabriela Leff. **Reviewed at Seattle Film Festival, June 9, 1998.** Running time: **85 MIN.**

With: Mike O'Malley, Jill Tracy, J.K. Simmons, Phyllis Somerville, Lenny Venito, Scott Bryce, Arthur Nascarello, Frank Senger, Peter Appel, David Zayas, Gene Canfield, Angela Pietropinto, Erik Jensen, Charlie White, Harsh Nayyar, Tibor Feldman, Mary Birdsong, Carmen Bonafont, Mark Margolis.

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By KEN EISNER

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**A**lthough there's some talent on display in "Above Freezing," pic is the epitome of an unhappy trend in low-budget American fare: longform sitcoms from helmers informed entirely by the tube, not cinema. In this indiecom world, dialogue consists entirely of warmed-over wisecracks; events that would be a blip in a TV half-hour drag on forever, and when there's a stab at turning serious, characters have as much emotional resonance as refugees from a Taster's Choice ad. Still, cookie-cutter pic was first runner-up for the Seattle fest's most-popular-film prize. While helmer's affection for his creations is evident, his derivative script jinxes any chance of pic leaving cable deep-freeze.

First-time scripter-helmer Frank Todaro, in a detour from making tube spots, couldn't have started with a more standard setup: Thirtysomething New Yorker Artie (Mike O'Malley) lives with Jane (soap veteran Jill Tracy), but he's commitment-phobic while her biological clock is clanging away. The only twist is that Artie works as a flower-shop wholesaler, and the scenes with his co-workers down at the refrigerated warehouse have the most oomph, in terms of location texture and conversational detail.

Trouble is, no one's allowed to simply impart information or reveal character, since every line, by law, has to end with a zinger. This makes for some fairly strained laugh lines, an effect not helped by muffled sound recording in the pic's first third.

Having struggled to get his flimsy plot under way, Todaro grinds things to a fast halt by locking his antihero in the freezer at work. At first, you expect a minor digression, but as Artie settles in for a lengthy, low-temperature heart-to-heart with an unlucky customer (J.K. Simmons), you realize that this will be it. The confusing lensing and cutting don't improve matters.

Helmer tries to relieve pic's essentially static nature with a thrown-together subplot involving Jane's ex (Scott Bryce), a smarmy car salesman with connections to the mob, as repped by various tough-talking wiseguys who inject some "you-want-I-should-speak-with-him?" jollity into the final quarter.

Most of the players (all TV vets) are better than their material, with character pro Simmons — as the floral customer who leaves his closet while locked in the fridge — a particular standout. O'Malley has a droll, eyebrow-arching sense of timing, but neither lead is especially compelling in the romance department, so it's hard to care how things turn out. Not that the finish will surprise anyone.

Tech values are nothing much, with that sound glitch potentially fatal if not fixed quickly.