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HYSTERICAL BLINDNESS

An HBO Films presentation of a Karuna Dream/Blum Israel production. Produced by Lydia Dean Pilcher. Executive producers, Uma Thurman, Jason Blum, Amy Israel.

Directed by Mira Nair. Screenplay, Laura Cahill, based on her play. Camera (Deluxe color), Declan Quinn; editor, Kristina Boden; music, Lesley Barber; production designer, Stephanie Carroll; art director, Jeff Mossa; set decorator, Lydia Marks; costume designer, Kasia Walicka Maimone; sound (Dolby Digital), Tom Nelson; associate producer, Laura Cahill; assistant director, Michael De Casper; casting, Sheila Jaffe, Georgianne Walken. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Premiere), Jan. 16, 2002. Running time: 93 MIN.

Debby Uma Thurman
Virginia Gena Rowlands
Beth Juliette Lewis
Rick Justin Chambers
Nick Ben Gazzara
Bobby Anthony de Sando
Amber Jolie Peters

By DAVID ROONEY

Mira Nair's spirited ensemble comedy "Monsoon Wedding" was arguably her most satisfying film since she broke through with "Salaam Bombay!" She follows with her most mishandled effort since "The Perez Family," though the director may be less at fault here than the flimsy script adapted by Laura Cahill from her own play. A supposed slice-of-life drama about three working class women looking for love and stability in 1980s New Jersey, "Hysterical Blindness" is a numbingly obvious confection of laughter and tears that's utterly condescending to its one-note characters. Chosen as the centerpiece premiere at Sundance, this superficial tale of heartache and frustrated dreams airs in August on HBO.

There's something that screams "vanity project" about gorgeous blue-blood Uma Thurman—in a vehicle she exec-produced and fostered from the source material—playing big-haired blue-collar trash, dancing around with sexual abandon to Pat Benatar in a bar full of roughneck guys and still unable to get a man. But Thurman does herself no favors with her strident performance.

The actress plays Debby, who's pushing 30 and suffers from momentary loss of vision, apparently caused by stress. She lives with her mother Virginia (Gena Rowlands), a veteran breakfast waitress in a local diner, in a row house in Bayonne, N.J., close enough to see the Manhattan skyline, but worlds apart in terms of sophistication.

Debby and her friend Beth (Juliette Lewis), who dropped out of high school when she got pregnant, hang out every night at Ollie's, a watering hole by the railroad tracks where they get tanked and pick up guys, often the source of conflict between them.

Somewhat neglecting her daughter Amber (Jolie Peters) for her social life, Beth cruises the friendly but non-committal bartender (Anthony de Sando), while Debby scores with Rick (Justin Chambers), a hunk with "Patrick Swayze eyes," and immediately starts daydreaming about marriage.

The focus of the drama is largely on Debby and her mother. Convinced she's stumbled onto Mr. Right in Rick despite all evidence to the contrary, Debby tosses dignity

aside as she desperately tries to stake a claim to the uninterested guy.

Virginia meanwhile gets a second chance at love when goodhearted diner customer Nick (Ben Gazzara) proves to be different from the men who've ditched her in the past. But fate intervenes to dash her hopes.

Seemingly grasping for a way to close the thin story in the absence of any sense of fulfillment or even self-realization for the characters, Cahill's script lurches out of nowhere into a tiresomely familiar women-getting-on-with-their-lives-without-men finale, in which Amber shows off a dance routine to "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," while Debby and Beth bop alongside her and Virginia beams radiantly from the porch. The scene is such a contrived audience-pleaser, it further underlines the shallowness of the whole enterprise.

Ferociously chewing on cigarettes, Thurman and Lewis give self-consciously physical performances that are all about their tortured hair, garish makeup, man-hungry gazes, thick Joisey accents and vulgar '80s outfits, an unsubtle parade of stretch fabric, leopard-print, feathers and fringes. Likewise, the soundtrack takes the expected route, with a grab bag of familiar hits from the decade.

Lewis' character at least has something of a back story, and Beth's odd rapport with her daughter yields some minor charm and amusement. But Thurman pushes all of Debby's in-

securities, neuroses and needs to the surface. The character seems such a dim bulb that when Nick tells her she's a smart, special lady just like her mother, it rings completely false since neither he nor the audience have been clued in to this. Her sole redeeming qualities appear to be her loyalty to her friend and protective urge toward her mother.

Flatteringly photographed and flawlessly made-up, Rowlands brings too much poise and class to be believable as a woman pouring coffee for tips all her life. But the restraint and understatement shown in scenes between the actress and Gazzara—who shared the screen in John Cassavetes' "Opening Night"—provide moments of poignancy and some welcome relief from all the theatrical mugging.

Aside from the now-standard use of loose, handheld camerawork, Nair directs the unhip material in a thoroughly conventional style.

Scenes with Rowlands and Gazzara provide moments of poignancy in 'Hysterical Blindness.'



SEX AND THE BITTYS: Uma Thurman and Juliette Lewis hang out in a New Jersey bar in "Hysterical Blindness."