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Tunnel vision

Mira Nair's *Hysterical Blindness*, set in 1980s New Jersey, puts a human face on the B&T crowd

By **Michael Freidson**

In her previous films, including *Salaam Bombay* and *Monsoon Wedding*, the Indian filmmaker Mira Nair has told passionate stories about class culture, examining flawed people in exotic locations. So it's no surprise that she treats 1980s blue-collar New Jersey with the same unflinching eye. *Hysterical Blindness*, written by Laura Cahill and based on her play, is set in Bayonne, a town where the local bar is the main attraction. The film could easily have been a rote exercise in Aqua Net stereotyping (or a generic chick flick, given that it's also about three women looking for love in all the wrong places), but Nair transforms it into a fascinating if ultimately flawed study of character and place.

The film follows two familiar-looking Jersey girls: Debby (Uma Thurman), a customer-service rep at a warehouse, relaxes at the local watering hole, trying to soothe her nerves (which may be responsible for her recent blind spells). Her friend Beth (Juliette Lewis), a single mom, flirts with anything that walks through the door. The duo fight for the attention of a brooding construction worker (Justin Chambers) while, across town, Deb's waitress mom (Gena Rowlands) is having her own affair with an imperfect man (Ben Gazarra).

All this romantic angst is accompanied by acid-wash jeans, heavy makeup and Joisey accents. But rather than exploiting the bridge-and-tunnel atmosphere for cheap laughs, Nair populates it with multidimensional characters. The dive's bartender (Anthony De Sando), for example, is a seedy lothario but well aware of his place in life. Beth's little daughter (Jolie Peters) hates that her mom drinks. And Debby, scarred by her absentee father, can't hold on to a man, even though she's the hottest girl in town.

Ultimately, *Blindness* immerses us in Debby's pitiful world. Shrill and often drunk, she's insecure and usually talks when she should shut up. She wears her obnoxiousness like a carapace, keeping people away from her true self, and sometimes it's hard to watch. Nair is known for teasing sweetness from the vulgar—in *Monsoon*, she turned the pockmarked, big-nosed Vijay Raaz into a leading man—and here, the director lets the camera hang on Thurman relentlessly, observing her every foible. The actor looks believably vulnerable throughout, whether crying or flinching from human contact. After sex, Debby offers to make a man breakfast and when he declines—for the third time—you see the confused pain in Thurman's eyes.

As Debby's pal, Lewis turns in a surprisingly nuanced performance, looking defeated by life. Lewis thrives when playing down and dirty roles (see her poor souls in *Kalifornia* or *Evening Star*) and she's at home in this grimy mileu. Rowlands, on the other hand, delivers the same soft matronly act she's done in a dozen other recent television movies. Her performance seems out of place in a movie where everything else is so alive.

In the final few scenes, *Blindness* suddenly and unexpectedly disintegrates into a cliché feel-good film (the women even gleefully chase one another with a garden hose). It's unfortunate, but it makes you realize that that's what the entire movie could have been—two goofy girls from Bayonne, worshiping Bon Jovi and bad clothes. Instead, Nair chose to capture a different kind of ugly beauty—the human kind. And when that works, *Blindness* is a class act.

HAIR-RAISING EXPERIENCE Uma Thurman (left) and Juliette Lewis (right, under the 'do) play Jersey girls in *Hysterical Blindness*.

Hysterical Blindness
Dir. Mira Nair. 90mins. Uma Thurman, Juliette Lewis, Gena Rowlands, Ben Gazarra.

***Hysterical Blindness* airs Sunday 25 at 8pm on HBO.**

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