

Young people today. Now they're refusing to label themselves as straight, gay, or bisexual. Can you imagine? Much has been made recently in the media over what has been dubbed a social phenomenon in the under-25 set, about the rejection of sexual labels and the embracement of a world where it's accepted for everyone to simply be sexual across every group. At first glance, the social phenomenon with names like polysexuality and ambisexuality seems like a type of lifestyle utopia, but students of history will note that utopias have a poor track record of survival when faced with reality. The question of whether sexual definitions still have rigid meaning today echoes throughout *Race You to the Bottom*, the feature film debut of writer-director Russell Brown, although he thankfully never turns *Race* into an "issues" film. The relationship politics of sexual identity color every frame, but at the same time, *Race* is at heart a coming-of-age story, framed by a two-hander road trip narrative structure. The twentysomething pair in question are Nathan (Cole Williams), a travel writer, who embarks on a weekend trip to Napa Valley with Maggie (a very strong Amber Benson of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" fame). Although both Nathan and Maggie have boyfriends, they are also simultaneously having an intense affair with each other. The future of their very open-minded relationship is put through the wringer of harsh reality as the weekend progresses.

Says Brown of the inspiration for the film, "A lot of people assumed that this was something which happened in my life, but it really wasn't. I had just never seen a film which had really captured what I saw around me in terms of the dynamic between gay men and women." While letting the problems inherent in the relationship of Nathan and Maggie slowly percolate in the background, Brown

develops his rich characters with strong dialogue which highlights the fact that both Nathan and Maggie are on the run from reality in a variety of ways. Their union is the product of that, and thus, it is destined to be ill-fated, at least for the time being. The lush cinematography by Marco Fargnoli captures the autumn of Northern California in ways that perfectly complements the arc of Nathan and Maggie's love—full of color and fading sunshine. Explains Brown, "Their relationship is this fantasy that could never actually work, so we wanted the locations to feel almost fantastical; to feel so beautiful and lush and romantic, that they might be unbelievable."

Next up for Brown will be overseeing the release of his second feature, *The Bluetooth Virgin*, which he has recently completed. The film centers around two writer friends whose relationship is put to the test when one is asked to read the other's screenplay, entitled "The Bluetooth Virgin"...and absolutely hates it. Anchored around a series of conversations between the two friends, *The Bluetooth Virgin* features Brown's noted prowess with dialogue and deep characterizations.

Before embarking on his feature directing career, Brown founded the popular website TheSimon.com, featuring arts and political commentary, which he still edits. In these days of "Thumbs up/Thumbs down" simplified film reviewing, The Simon is particularly noteworthy for being something of a welcome throwback to the likes of Pauline Kael. Says Brown of film reviewing, "It's not just about whether you think something is good or bad. It's about how you're taking it in; how you're affected by something. And that's far more interesting to me than whether you think someone's performance is good or bad, because that's so subjective anyway." ▼

Racing with Russell Brown

With his first feature, *Race You to the Bottom*, the filmmaker has crafted a sharp debut which explores sexual identity issues in the framework of a romantic road trip gone awry

Speedway

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