

Snow Angels: Unnecessarily slight insight into a dreary world

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by David Gordon Green; screenplay by Green, based on the novel by Stewart O’Nan

The youthful American filmmaker David Gordon Green (born 1975) gained recognition with his first film, *George Washington*, in 2000, an unusual piece about a group of young people in a southern town. This was followed by *All the Real Girls* (2003), set in a North Carolina mill town. In 2005, he made the violent family drama *Undertow*.

Snow Angels is Green’s fourth feature and aims, like his other films, to shed light on the internal lives of a collection of working class people and divulge something about their world.

The film follows three relationships that ebb, flow and, in one case, crash, in a small town. The local high school football team is known as “The Red Hots.” The film opens with the anemic sounds of a marching band, hinting that not only is the sports team misnamed, but that happiness and vitality in general, “red hot” or otherwise, are in short supply in this town.

Attempting to refocus his lackluster ensemble of young musicians, the bandleader, Mr. Chervenick (Tom Noonan), shouts out: “We’re all part of a formation. Every person matters” in the effort to explore “the physical musical possibility of making something substantial.”

That “something substantial” is a rendering of Peter Gabriel’s song, “Sledgehammer,” and the ensemble responds to their leader’s exhortation with continued lack of interest. One feels almost immediately that not much of anything matters in this gray hamlet. And, as is too often the case in American life, the town’s monotony and stagnation are only disrupted when gunshots ring out. In a flashback, the film presents the background to the tragic events.

Arthur (Michael Angarano), the trombone player in the marching band, works part-time at a shabby Chinese restaurant, noticeably lacking in Asian personnel. Working with him as a waitress is his former baby-sitter, Annie (Kate Beckinsale), with whom he has a warm, flirtatious relationship. Arthur’s parents, Louise and Don Parkinson (Jeannetta Arnette and Griffin Dunne), are separating and Annie provides adult comfort, not to mention some eye-catching physical attributes. Annie enjoys Arthur’s attention because most of her life is an emotional war zone.

She is estranged from an unstable husband, her high school sweetheart, Glenn (Sam Rockwell), who has recently made a suicide attempt. He is an alcoholic who can’t hold down a job and has found God in the hope of reinventing himself for the benefit of his long-suffering parents and, above all, Annie. But the more Annie turns off to Glenn’s desperate attempts at reconciliation, the more he is thrown off kilter.

Glenn tries hard to be a good parent to their four-year-old daughter, but he is not beneath using her to manipulate Annie (“You tell your mom daddy’s not drinking anymore”). On one excursion, he takes his daughter to the mall to get a father-daughter photo that has to be “super perfect.” Fantasy and artifice are Glenn’s primary coping mechanisms.

Annie adds to her troubles by sleeping with Nate (Nicky Katt), the husband of her co-worker and friend, Barb (Amy Sedaris). Their afternoon rendezvous in a cheap motel serves to underscore their collective deep-seated loneliness and frustration (Annie: “Why do I overanalyze?” Nate: “Today is a gift. That’s why they call it the present”). As might be predicted, Glenn’s newfound religiosity fails him when he learns of Annie’s affair.

Meanwhile, Arthur falls for the sweet, quirky Lila (Olivia Thirlby). Armed with a new self-confidence, he confronts and chastises his father for being a selfish philanderer. It is an encounter that yields positive results for the family. Annie and Glenn, however, are not so fortunate.

To its credit, *Snow Angels* exhibits a great deal of sympathy for its characters. Even the somewhat sleazy Nate and the born-again loser Glenn have their endearing qualities. Despite the movie’s essentially pedestrian narrative, Green treats his characters and their dilemmas with seriousness. In a remarkable scene in a bar, an inebriated Glenn homes in on an older black and white couple dancing to their own rhythms and thoughts, creating an opportunity for the viewer to feel for his growing disorientation.

Snow Angels is jam-packed with American malaise. Green cares about his characters and their difficulties, and takes care in depicting them. There is a conscientiousness to his efforts, and one feels that he is on to something about American life, particularly the quite diminished prospects in its small towns and cities in the first decade of the twenty-first century. These

are people who don't "count" for much, except perhaps when it comes time for the military to fill up its ranks. Industry in these places, if it existed, has largely disappeared. The available jobs are not merely low-paying, but dull, repetitive and empty. What do most people have to look forward to?

One often feels with Green that he is on the verge of making an important film, of bringing poetry and realism together in an interesting manner. On the verge, but not more, and there is the danger of treading water, or backsliding. Why? The problem is not a personal weakness, but a generalized difficulty: contemporary independent filmmaking lacks a deeper "realism," a realism that would take in more of history and social life, that would concretize the events and dramatize them in a sharper and more vital manner.

The film's production notes provide an indication of the problem: "*Snow Angels* is a heartrending story about love lost and found in a small town in which a terrible event shakes the entire community and reveals the precarious nature of life." Unfortunately, this more or less sums it up. The psychic complexity of the film's characters, their endless stumblings and sufferings, is disconnected from the social structure represented in the movie, which is treated as a passive, timeless element, as a given.

Are these towns merely gray? Are gunshots, or some rather contrived psychological awakening (like Arthur's), the only phenomena that will shake people out of their inertia? It is not their fault, but one must tell the truth: the filmmakers do not have an inkling of the explosiveness of the increasing economic distress they reveal, sometimes only in passing, or the ultimate impact of these conditions on their human protagonists. What they assume will go on forever will not go on forever.

Unfortunately, for too many the objective social world is a collection of static places and things, nothing more than an elaborate prop. "[R]elationships spin around each other in orbits of pain, love and desperation," says *Snow Angels*' production notes.

About Green's *All the Real Girls*, the WSWS wrote: "[Green] plants his film solidly in contemporary reality, but wishes to transcend it, without working through its most profound contradictions, which are inevitably *social and historical* in character. So the film has conflicting impulses, and suffers as a result.

"The biggest difficulty is that the filmmaker holds emotions and social life apart. He wants to use the social setting merely as a skeleton onto which he hangs his truths. But people are not simply vessels for the working out of eternal human dilemmas, they do this working out under definite historical circumstances, as members of specific classes, all of which impart to these 'eternal dilemmas' a quite distinct coloring and character, qualitatively so."

The absence of a more profound social understanding leads the filmmakers to trip up. The implication in *Snow Angels*, for

example, that Arthur and Lila, despite all their positive traits, could be another Annie and Glenn points to Green's rather abstract approach. These two couples hail from different generations and social classes. The director doesn't appear to see this or grant it much significance.

In an interview with [movieweb.com](http://www.movieweb.com), Green says: "[T]his is a cautionary tale for [Arthur and Lila]. I think that if Glenn and Annie look back, they can see the Arthur and Lila within them." But this equation is at odds with the circumstances and histories of the respective couples.

An individual's inner and outer lives are not as free-floating as Green would have it. The film acknowledges that Arthur, Lila, Annie and Glenn have passed through different formative experiences. Arthur, from an academic family, and Lila, apparently from the cultured, well-traveled middle class, clearly have more opportunities than are available to Annie and Glenn, both working class and a generation older. While poverty and a lack of prospects bear down on the latter couple, in fact, largely shape their fates, the film prefers to address their failings as personal ones.

And because social and class issues are inactive features for Green, what drives a character in the film becomes essentially arbitrary and subjective. So while Green depicts a dead-end and stifling environment, this seems, from his point of view, to have little ultimate bearing on the trajectory of his characters. Regardless of what is unfolding in the "outside" world, every person, according to Green, controls his or her destiny, what he describes in an interview as relying on one's own "mental capacity and instincts." Therefore, *Snow Angels* ends up not so much a protest against a social order and these deadening conditions, but a focus on individual flaws that lazily meanders into the unpleasant arena of "personal responsibility."

Present social and cultural conditions play a great role in this. Green and others of his generation have only known a stultifying social and political climate. Their tendency to moralize, to appeal for small acts of kindness, to emphasize individual conduct, stems as much as anything else from the fact that they don't see an alternative to the status quo, which they regard as eternal and unchanging. Events will disrupt this notion.

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