

# THE FILMS OF DAVID O. RUSSELL

January 9–February 6, 2011

## ***SPANKING THE MONKEY***

Friday, January 21, 7:30 p.m.

1994, 100 mins. 35mm print source: Warner Bros. Classics.

Written and directed by David O. Russell. Produced by Dean Silvers. Photographed by Michael Mayers.

Production design by Susan Block. Edited by Pam Martin.

Principal cast: Jeremy Davies (as Raymond Aibelli), Alberta Watson (Susan Aibelli), Benjamin Hendrickson (Tom Aibelli), Carla Gallo (Toni Peck), Matthew Puckett (Nicky), Judette Jones (Aunt Helen).

Review by Caryn James, *The New York Times*, July 15, 1994:

The title *Spanking the Monkey* works like a generational litmus test. People in their 20s and younger recognize it, although it may baffle anyone older. In this very funny dark comedy, the phrase conveys a healthy, cross-generational attitude toward masturbation.

Ray Aibelli, the film's frustrated college-age hero, belongs to a generation that seems to take a rational, clear-sighted approach to sex. But he finds himself at the center of a twisted coming-of-age story. His misguided experience involves a brief fling at incest with his attractive mother, among other bitter family dysfunctions. Yet *Spanking the Monkey* remains good-humored, sane and amusing. It's as if David O. Russell, the film's 35-year-old writer and director, had dared himself to do the impossible in his first feature and gotten away with it. It is no fluke that the film won the Audience Award at this year's Sundance Film Festival. With its witty, nonexploitative treatment of a lurid subject, *Spanking the Monkey* is an unexpected crowd pleaser. It is also the sort of

astonishingly fresh and self-assured work that can make a reputation.

Ray (Jeremy Davies) has been forced to give up a summer internship in Washington to stay home in suburban Connecticut nursing his mother, whose broken leg is in a cast. His father (Benjamin Hendrickson), a penny-pinching salesman of self-help videos, is on the road. When his dad says goodbye at the airport, he leaves Ray with a maze of looney rules about not using the car and maybe walking Frank, the dog. He also hands Ray a toothbrush, which he must use to clean the dog's delicate gums. Frank is not considerate in return. Whenever Ray is in the bathroom, the dog howls at the door.

From his father's meaningless rules to Ray's relationship with his mother, here is the way the film works: Mr. Russell begins with convincing, detailed realism, then gradually pushes the characters over the edge into lunatic behavior.

Ray's mother, Susan (Alberta Watson), is around 40, bored, lonely and depressed. As she lies on the bed, her long hair gives her a languorous look, and

her sleepy manner is sensuous but not overtly sexual. She is certainly not a monster, although she is careless in the way she demands attention from her son.

When Ray has to help her stand in the shower, the scene is not titillating, but it's not exactly innocent or proper, either. Mr. Russell has a smooth way of breaking the tension with irreverent humor, like having Ray notice that his mother has a birthmark shaped like a shopping cart on her buttock.

Meanwhile, Ray rattles around the house, resentful at losing his internship. He tries to see old friends, but he has no real friends left in town. A sweet high school junior, a psychiatrist's daughter named Toni (Carla Gallo), is interested in him, but she seems decades too young.

All the actors are perfectly in tune with the film's deadpan, understated manner, and Mr. Davies gives an especially deft performance. When Susan asks Ray to massage her toes, she says sadly, "I can never get your father to do these things for me anymore." Mr. Davies's expression is both repressed and disturbed. Throughout the film he suggests that Ray is bothered by his mother's sexuality, yet he never overdramatizes what is, after all, an intimate response.

The incest scene itself is brief and discreet, and it happens in part because Ray and Susan have had

too many vodka tonics while watching television on Susan's bed. They start tossing bits of cheese at the television screen, laughing hysterically, then rolling around. There is a quick cut to the next morning.

Mr. Russell makes it clear that incest isn't funny. But the aftermath, as Ray tries to find a road back to mental health, is even more comic than his descent into forbidden sex. Toni comes to Ray's room, which makes Susan furiously jealous. The psychiatrist's daughter responds, "I don't see how you can have so much inappropriate control over his life."

"Is this how you like them?" Susan asks Ray. "Little baby psychobabble?"

*Spanking the Monkey* leaves behind a nagging question: did this film have to be about incest? It's true that few other experiences would have gone so directly to the heart of a story about escaping from one's parents, yet at times the mother-son sex seems curiously beside the point, no more than an attention-getting pretext. The question is legitimate, but perhaps what matters most is that it never surfaces while the audience is watching this smart, accomplished film. *Spanking the Monkey* is ultimately a triumph of freedom for Ray and for Mr. Russell, who has set himself up as a director able to tackle anything.

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