

THE FILMS OF DAVID O. RUSSELL

January 9–February 6, 2011

I HEART HUCKABEES

Sunday, February 6, 5:30pm

2004, 107 mins.

Directed by David O. Russell. Written by Russell and Jeff Baena. Photographed by Peter Deming. Production Design by K.K. Barrett. Edited by Robert K. Lambert. Costume Design by Mark Bridges. Original Music by Jon Brion.

Principal Cast: Jason Schwartzman (as Albert Markovski), Isabelle Huppert (Caterine Vauban), Dustin Hoffman (Bernard), Lily Tomlin (Vivian), Jude Law (Brad Stand), Mark Wahlberg (Tommy Corn), Naomi Watts (Dawn Campbell).

Excerpt from the article "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" by Dennis Lim, *The Village Voice*, September 21, 2004:

In a career that otherwise defies classification, writer-director David O. Russell has found humor where others fear to tread, or never think to look. *Spanking the Monkey* (1994) is a comedy about mother-son incest, *Flirting With Disaster* (1996) a comedy about adoption and adultery, *Three Kings* (1999) a comedy about the moral confusion of war. A euphoric bungee jump into the abyss of the Big Everything, the 46-year-old Russell's miraculous new film, *I ♥ Huckabees* (opening October 1), is by far his boldest: a comedy about the meaning of life, the nature of reality, the mystery of consciousness, and the elusiveness of infinity. It poses questions that are seldom spoken out loud, and generally not heard at your local multiplex: "How am I not myself?" and "Is existence a cruel joke?" and "What happens in a meadow at dusk?" and "Do you love me, with the bonnet?"

If Russell's blithely profound mishmash of screwball Sartre and zany Zen seems incongruous, it's because movies have historically consigned

existential musings to the more passive and agonized sectors of art cinema. *Huckabees*, like Russell's other films, is furiously active, bordering on unhinged, and its farcical tone proves ideally suited to philosophical striving: The movie acknowledges that to undertake such a quest is often to risk ridicule, even as it reconnects existentialism to a rich tradition of absurdity. "A Zen monk once told me, 'If you're not laughing, you're not getting it.'" Russell says. "These questions are absurd in some respects. Sometimes you cry because of the absurdity. Some people say that you talk about the serious stuff and then you put in comedy to make it go down easier. But no, they're one and the same."

Balancing an almost unfeasible multitude of ideas at any given moment, *I ♥ Huckabees* defies lucid synopsis. Poet-activist Albert (Jason Schwartzman), a fervent campaigner against suburban sprawl, hires "existential detectives" Bernard and Vivian Jaffe (Dustin Hoffman and Lily Tomlin) to investigate a coincidence that he hopes will illuminate an underlying truth about his life. Various aiding and complicating the client's psychic "dismantling" are Brad (Jude Law), a

slippery exec who muscles in on Albert's coalition on behalf of Huckabees, a Target-like department store; Brad's girlfriend and Huckabees model Dawn (Naomi Watts); Albert's fellow patient Tommy (an amazing Mark Wahlberg), a firefighter enraged about September 11 and the evils of the petroleum economy (perhaps a holdover from *Three Kings*, where Wahlberg's character was forced to drink crude oil by an Iraqi torturer); and the frosty Catherine Vauban (Isabelle Huppert), a French philosopher who offers a seductive nihilist alternative to the Jaffes (her business card promises "cruelty, manipulation, meaninglessness").

Russell, who spent his twenties as an activist, says *Huckabees* is his most personal film to date. "I know what it's like to stand in parking lots trying to talk to people. That's what drove me to Jason. When I first saw *Rushmore* I recognized that spirit. Jason's friendship with Mark in the movie is like my friendship with Mark. I'm the middle-class guy who went to college; Mark is the ghetto guy who went to jail." But unlike Schwartzman's character, he adds, "I never wrote political poetry, except maybe once in the eighth grade, in the mode of a kind of Jimi Hendrix rant. I did organize people in a mill town in Maine, primarily around getting a slumlord to fix up tenements. That was the first time I used video to document something for political purposes—we showed it to the mayor and the tenements got fixed."

I ♥ Huckabees may be the most heartfelt cinematic reaction yet to September 11—especially in Wahlberg's character, it crystallizes the free-floating confusion and despair of the post-9-11 world, and shows a bracing willingness to dive in. "Everything Tommy says about 9-11 is what I think about it: 'Why is it people only ask themselves deep questions when something really bad happens?' For about five minutes after 9-11, people were filled with questions about existence and our culture and our world," Russell says. "And then it was back to

business. Let's put it in a box called 'terrorists' and not think about it." *Huckabees* positions the very act of questioning as an essential rebellion. "I would say that's the fundamental difference between the Democratic and Republican parties. That's why the Republicans have an easier time—they just don't ask questions," Russell says. "And that's always an easier sell. 'Just have this beer—and this fear—and leave it to us.'"

For its maker, *Huckabees* is an attempt to synthesize years of existential inquiry into a personal comic cosmology—drawing on "stuff that I've been intrigued with since I read *Franny and Zooey*, and since I met Bob Thurman [the Buddhist scholar and father of Uma] at Amherst College. I like that Eastern philosophy never had a witch-burning phase, a missionary phase." But, he adds, "the film was about taking these ideas and creating a whole universe. It's not saying, this is Buddhist or this is French; it creates its own vernacular." The film's philosophers symbolize thinkers or theories that have affected him: Tomlin's character is based on an old analyst, Hoffman's on Thurman, while Huppert's represents a confluence of French existentialism and Zen that expresses a key viewpoint of the film, namely that we vacillate between "human drama" and "pure being." (In *I ♥ Huckabees*, "pure being" is attained via a literal, consciousness-altering smack to the head with a giant ball.) "Our brains work well as creatures of habit, but to get to a deeper truth, it's good to get knocked out of it sometimes," Russell says. "And people can do that in meditation or sex or drugs or music or sports-places where people shift to a different brain."

Walking an improbable tightrope, *Huckabees* takes deep philosophical matters seriously but never takes itself all that seriously. "My models are Duchamp and Magritte and all their colleagues," Russell says, adding that the tone of the film simply reflects the spirit in which he's inclined to approach philosophy—"very intensively but with a lot of

humor. Most of it is from the rollicking open feeling of reading ancient scriptures with Bob [Thurman]." The ♥ in the title is an oblique nod to the famous Milton Glaser design, which enjoyed renewed popularity after September 11: "It's ironic about *Huckabees* and also sincere in the end," he says.

Is a film that poses so many questions obliged to provide at least a few answers? It could be argued that *Huckabees*' insistence on the inadequacy of any one school of thought goes right to the core of existentialism. Russell says the movie is more mapped out than it appears. Dovetailing toward a conclusion was "like getting ready to jump off a cliff," he says. "I didn't want it to end in a blank or negative way—I felt that was a risk. After having the characters struggle this much, so consciously for so long, I couldn't. But we can be in the same situation and feel very differently about it. You move an inch and that's a great distance sometimes." He adds: "I think that's the most daring thing about this movie—its optimism and its joy."

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