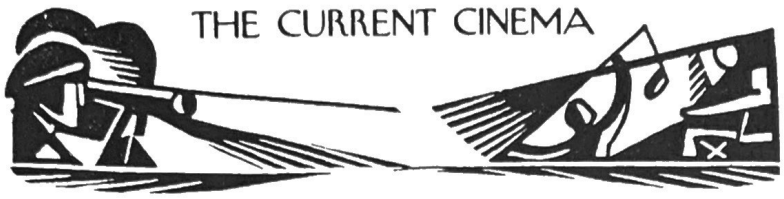


BORN TO LOSE

Misunderstood "Boys," and "Welcome to the Dollhouse."

BY TERRENCE RAFFERTY

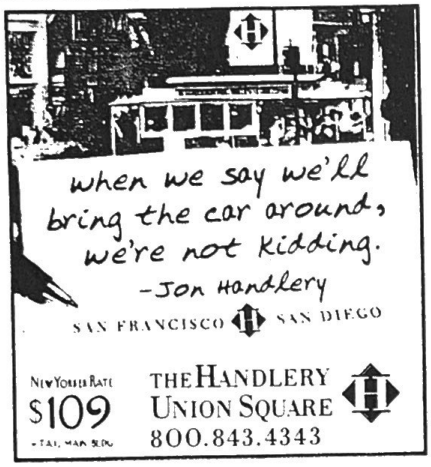
STACY COCHRAN'S strange, fragile romantic comedy "Boys" opened a couple of weekends ago—on the same day as "Twister," the first blockbuster of Hollywood's summer season. When a studio (in this case, Disney's Touchstone division) throws a small picture in the path of another studio's big one, you don't have to be an expert to figure out why: the more modest film is *expected* to tank at the box office. And, if there's one thing studio marketers are good at, it's insuring that a movie they dislike doesn't succeed in spite of them. They can, for example, give the picture the aura of a loser by refusing to screen it for critics until just before it opens. "Boys," subjected to this sort of self-fulfilling negative buzz, has received lukewarm-to-terrible reviews and has done no business. It deserves better. The movie's tone—like that of Cochran's terrific first feature, "My New Gun" (1992)—is mercurial, unstable, and stubbornly idiosyncratic; inevitably, some viewers will find it puzzling. Cochran is too eccentric to make a conventional comedy, yet, unfortunately (in marketing terms), her style is too subtle and uninsistent to place her among the aggressively hip, genre-bending filmmakers of the Tarantino generation. The funny thing is, this young filmmaker may have a more deeply subversive sensibility than any of her celebrated peers. "Boys" is essentially a screwball comedy, but one that dares to do without the familiar contrivances of farce; its brisk momentum depends not on a precise sequence of comic catastrophes but on an elusive, intuitive sense of how accidents change people's lives.

The heroine, twenty-five-year-old Patty Vare (Winona Ryder), is, in the best screwball tradition, affluent and discontented. She lives alone in a large, beautiful house whose grounds have fallen into neglect: the gardens are overgrown; the porch is unswept; the pool is empty except for a layer of dead leaves. And, as in thirties comedies, the bored rich girl needs something to shake her out of her cushy lethargy—to set her on the run from herself. In the opening scene of "Boys," it's clear that something has already happened to Patty: a cop (played by John C. Reilly) appears at her door to question her about a stolen car, and her shifty, nervous responses indicate that she knows more about it than she's willing to admit. Her impulse is to flee, but she's not really decisive enough to do anything wholeheartedly. She gets on her horse and rides through the countryside, without, apparently, a clear purpose or destination: she simply needs the feeling of being in motion. The mood of this initial sequence is hushed and austere, almost ominous, so it's no surprise that the story's first significant event isn't amusing at all: Patty is thrown from her horse and knocked unconscious. The surprise comes a little later, when we realize that, in the skewed universe of "Boys," the heroine's scary mishap has the function of the "meeting cute" convention of the screwball genre: it serves to introduce her to the man who will take her away from all this. Here, however, the man is a boy—a prep-school senior named John Baker (Lukas Haas). And, instead of the hate-at-first-sight bickering that typically impedes the course of true love in romantic comedies, "Boys" creates suspense by the stunningly perverse technique of delaying the heroine's return to full consciousness. He gazes at her with awe; she's out like a light.

Haas and Ryder: His geeky ardor and her muddled spirit make them a charming pair of lovers.

NICOLAS DE CRECY

The whole picture is constructed of such delicate, ironic reversals of expectation. John, of course, carries his sleeping beauty back to his dorm room, and we have every reason to anticipate that "Boys" will try to get as much comic mileage as it can out of his desperate attempts to hide her. But Cochran allows the deception to unravel pretty quickly. The kids at this school are sharp observers of one another, if only because they don't have much else to do; for teen-age boys living together in the middle of nowhere, the constant, cynical scrutinizing of dorm-mates' habits is the best cheap entertainment. So the movie mostly spares us the farce machinery of slamming doors, elaborate ruses, and narrow escapes, and instead cuts to the chase—that is, to the filmmaker's pursuit of a riskier, freer kind of comedy. The humor of "Boys" grows out of its youthful lovers' restlessness and dissatisfaction; as if in sympathy, the movie itself seems to wander in and out of familiar styles, inhabiting them briefly and then moving on.



Cochran's screenplay is based—extremely loosely—on the short story "Twenty Minutes," by James Salter. "Boys" amounts to an extended improvisation on Salter's central motif, of a woman thrown from a horse; aside from that, the story and the film share only a tone of wry, melancholy lyricism. Romantic comedies about young people aren't ordinarily set, as "Boys" is, in lonely, autumnal landscapes, but the relatively sombre visual style has a curiously liberating effect, like playing a pop standard in an unusual key. Cochran manages to spin something sweet and hopeful out of Salter's mournful theme, and does so not by ignoring the darker implications of the story but by acknowledging them. The beauty of the movie's conception is that its heroine and its hero suffer from entirely different kinds of unhappiness, which prove, in the end, to be perfectly complementary. Patty, who has the reputation of a flighty, "wild" girl, is in fact not so much a dilettante as a fatalist: things just happen to her, without her quite knowing why, and she doesn't see the point of resisting them. John also suffers from emotional inertia; but his seems the result of an existence that's too rigidly structured, not random *enough*, and he maintains his sanity by writing lurid stories—that is, by exercising the imaginative will that Patty conspicuously lacks. Discovering a gorgeous young woman thrown from a horse is exactly the sort of thing that doesn't happen to him, and he's more than happy to resign himself to the mysterious workings of destiny: "An angel fell in my lap," he says, in a moment of drunken euphoria. And while John is enjoying the new experience of going with the flow, Patty—who is tired of accidents, and is pleasantly surprised that someone would actually take the trouble to rescue her from their consequences—is beginning to appreciate the value of a less passive approach to life. She gradually sheds her groggy, distracted air, and acts on her desires.

"Boys," like Cochran's first movie, asks the audience to believe in a mighty unlikely pair of lovers. That it succeeds is due largely to the charm of its leading actors: Haas's geeky ardor is touching and funny, and Ryder gives a strikingly lucid portrayal of a muddled spirit. What holds the movie's volatile mixture of tones and characters together, though, is the filmmaker's willingness to ride her own complex romantic sensibility as far as it will take her. Cochran's off-kilter wit can seem merely flaky, but perhaps that's because we're unused to romantic comedies in which the lovers' fate depends, perilously, on both accident and will. The crowning joke of "Boys" is its final shot, of Patty and John (accompanied, bizarrely, by a younger schoolmate) speeding away from their unsatisfying lives and disappearing into the changing fall landscape: a happily-ever-after ending that somehow manages to perpetuate the story's unpredictability. No wonder "Boys" has baffled almost everyone. Cochran keeps throwing screwballs to viewers who can't seem to handle anything but the hard stuff anymore.

If nothing else, "Boys" provides a welcome alternative to the facile, self-serving view of youthful alienation in Todd Solondz's "Welcome to the Dollhouse," an independent film that won the Grand Jury Prize at the most recent Sundance Film Festival. Solondz's movie tries to make scabrous comedy out of the miseries of an unpopular seventh grader named Dawn Wiener (Heather Matarazzo). The film pitilessly chronicles the indignities visited on Dawn by her vicious classmates and her grotesque family (shrewish mother, weak-willed father, nerdy big brother, princessy little sister), and Solondz wallows in the details of her daily persecution without ever quite settling on a coherent attitude toward it. Initially, he appears to be soliciting sympathy for his luckless heroine, who's picked on because she's homely and awkward; later, the picture becomes a kind of suburban "Lord of the Flies," in which the omnipresent emotional brutality of Dawn's environment—New Jersey—turns the girl into someone who's as cruel and insensitive as her tormentors are. Ultimately, the movie asks us to let her off the hook for being a squealer and a sneak; it leaves us with the glib poignance of lonely-kid imagery and an equally glib justification for her bad behavior—New Jersey made her do it. Solondz himself grew up in the Garden State, and his urge to avenge the humiliations of his childhood seems to get the better of him. As "Welcome to the Dollhouse" grinds on, it grows steadily nastier and more hysterical: in one scene near the end, the filmmaker actually ridicules Mrs. Wiener's grief at the kidnapping of her youngest child. It's a hateful movie. But it's bound to be a hit: there's a buzz about it. ♦