



"Stephanie Daley," "Everything's Gone Green"

By Matt Singer
IFC News

[Photo: Amber Tamblyn in "Stephanie Daley" Regent Releasing, 2007]

"Stephanie Daley"

As I watched "Stephanie Daley," I was overwhelmed with the notion that I was watching a "Sundance movie." I'm not sure if such a concept has been fully delineated yet within the critical community; if not, it may be time. The closing credits indicate that writer/director Hilary Brougher workshopped her film at the Sundance Institute, and the finished product won a screenwriting award at the 2006 festival, which sort of feels like someone giving themselves a pat on the back, but never mind. From a purely technical standpoint, this is a "Sundance movie," but even before I knew that concretely, I could *feel* it just by watching it. So what *is* a "Sundance movie?"

Author and scholar Thomas Schatz wrote in his book "Hollywood Genres" that as we watch more and more similar movies, "we develop expectations which, as they are continually reinforced, tend to harden into 'rules.'" A few pages later he adds, "A genre, then, represents a *range of expression* for filmmakers and a *range of experience* for viewers." And as I watched "Stephanie Daley," I could feel those rules hardening around me.

If there is such a thing as a "Sundance movie," then, and "Stephanie Daley" is such a picture, these would be the elements that apply. The basic plot is intensely melodramatic, but it is not played for melodrama: it is played for character study. The screenplay is very serious and almost totally free of any humor. The cinematography, by David Rush Morrison, is absolutely gorgeous, but it is also absolutely minimal, with a limited number of colors in the palette and a heavy emphasis on natural, realistic lighting. One could argue that the range of expression, both emotionally and visually, is somewhat narrow.

"Stephanie Daley"'s raw narrative materials could quite easily make a very traditional Hollywood film. Its title character (Amber Tamblyn) is first seen leaving bloody footprints as she stumbles through the snow; we soon learn her condition stems from the fact that she's just delivered a baby in a public bathroom stall. Months later, a pregnant forensic psychiatrist named Lydie Crane (Tilda Swinton) is assigned Stephanie's case and tasked to uncover whether she murdered her newborn, as prosecutors claim, or whether the baby was, as the accused claims, stillborn. As a construction, it's just about perfect and it's easy to conceive of where a major studio would have taken the material, possibly as some kind of psychological thriller that would have turned Lydie into an investigator uncovering her subject's dark secrets (think "Fargo" with more hot button-y birth rights issues).

Brougner takes an entirely different tack. Her "Stephanie Daley" is a mystery story that's not really about its mystery — it's rather a presentation of an air of suburban malaise and a certain kind of moral relativism (traits that also struck me as particularly "Sundance movie"-like). I will not say what Lydie learns about Stephanie or herself, but I will observe that whatever that might be is less important than what both characters ultimately come to see about themselves. Their own truths are more important than ours.

The range of experience for the viewer depends largely on that viewer's own knowledge and expectations of Schatz's rules. I certainly can't fault the filmmaking craft involved. "Stephanie Daley" is powerfully acted — Tamblyn was justly nominated for a Spirit Award for her performance — and shot with a sort of cool, gloomy beauty. Me? I enjoy a good soapy melodrama now and then, and would have preferred a slightly more passionate take on the material. Ironically, such a movie would probably feel fresher now than Brougner's, which was born of a place designed as an alternative to the mainstream that has now become a sort of mainstream all its own (if we called it "alternative" filmmaking instead of "independent," a comparison to rock music in the 1990s would be particularly apt).

There was a certain disconnect between what I wanted the movie to be and what it actually is, but that doesn't mean others won't feel different (the rest of the crowd at the screening I attended seemed a good deal more enthralled than me). And anyway, criticizing what a movie isn't is kind of dirty pool. No doubt Brougner made exactly the movie she wanted. It is a "Sundance movie."

"Everything's Gone Green"

When I spoke with author Douglas Coupland about "Everything's Gone Green," his first work as a screenwriter, at this year's South by Southwest Film Festival, he interrupted our interview and asked me how old I was. When I responded "26," he grinned and told me, in all seriousness, that I was headed for "The worst year of my life." Though I've (so far) found this not to be the case personally, Coupland clearly believes this statement to be true, because I just watched "Everything's Gone Green" and there it is again. After he's lost his job, his girlfriend, a potential fortune in lottery winnings, all in one day, Ryan (Paulo Costanzo), who is only a couple years my senior, is told by a buddy, "Your twenties suck, the worst period of your life. You're lonely. You feel like your head's being blowtorched from the inside. And you don't even know what it is because we were never even taught the words to describe it. So you feel like an idiot and a loser."

Listening to "Everything's Gone Green"'s dialogue, and judging from my brief but very amusing interview with Coupland himself, it appears that a lot of the characters are speaking for the author. All of the major characters go off on rants about their surroundings and their inherent flaws and idiosyncrasies, though they are almost entirely of a very laid back "D'ja ever notice?" variety. As such, the film, directed by Paul Fox, doesn't adhere to the popular show-don't-tell rule of filmmaking, but a lot of these mini -lectures about bacon-wrapped scallops or summer office cruises are very funny, at least in a very laid back "D'ja ever notice?" way.

After he loses his job and most of his financial and sexual prospects, Ryan winds up working for the lottery itself, where his job is to interview winners for the free circular the company has to provide to prove that the whole operation isn't just one big Ponzi scheme. And so the relatively broke Ryan gets to document financial success of a kind with which he will almost certainly never find himself up close and personal. It should go without saying that the movie will ultimately prove (over and over again) that the happiness brought on by massive influxes of undeserved cash is hollow and very short-lived.

Ryan's love interest is an intriguing woman named Ming (Steph Song) who works as a set decorator on the many American film productions that roll through their hometown of Vancouver. Her job ultimately comes down to disguising British Columbia so that it looks like Anytown, U.S.A., which gives Coupland the opportunity to poke fun at American movies as well as to observe how after a while they all become completely interchangeable. And, to an extent, "Everything's Gone Green" is sort of an anti-movie. There is a plot, but it is not pushed forward with any sort of muscular intensity, and any deterrents that stand in our heroes' paths are deflated for big laughs before they can actually do them any harm.

The artwork on the wall of Ryan's apartment in the beginning of the movie — the one he gets kicked out of when his girlfriend dumps him — reads "small, manageable dreams," an idea echoed by a road sign that Ryan drives past in the closing shots that says "choose not to lose." Ryan doesn't really grow, then, he finds his earlier beliefs tested and then affirmed. He should aim low, why the hell not? Coupland certainly obeyed his own dictum here: "Everything's Gone Green" is far from revolutionary, but it is light and fun and won't tax you too much in exchange for ninety entertaining minutes. Ryan comes out the other side of the worst year of his life in pretty good shape. I hope for my sake I do the same.

"Stephanie Daley" opens in New York on April 20th ([official site](#)); "Everything's Gone Green" is currently playing in New York opening wider on April 20th ([official site](#)).

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