

The Great New Wonderful Movie Review

'Wonderful' is a quietly rich post-9/11 study

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The attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, are never mentioned in "The Great New Wonderful." They don't need to be. They're the eggshells on which the film's characters walk every waking moment.

This mysteriously rich, mostly wonderful comedy-drama takes place in September 2002, when the lives of its unconnected New Yorkers have returned to something that looks like normal. "Normal" being a thin layer of tissue paper over the abyss.

The chic cake designer (Maggie Gyllenhaal) is back in her superficial rut, fretting about a rival (Edie Falco of "The Sopranos" in a small role) and focused on the wealthy clients to whom she'll sell \$1,000 confections named after Shakespearean heroines. The little old lady in Coney Island (Olympia Dukakis) goes to progressive political meetings, makes art-filled scrapbooks she puts in a drawer, and wonders why the sight of her couch-potato husband (Ed Setrakian) fills her with dread.

A pair of tense, well-intentioned yuppie parents (Judy Greer and Tom McCarthy) try to ignore the fact that their young son (Billy Donner) is a sociopathic brute. Two middle-class South Asian immigrants (Naseerudin Shah and Sharat Saxena) work a security detail for a visiting general and try to come to grips with their new country's freedoms and paradoxes.

In the film's most darkly funny tangent, a workplace grief counselor (Tony Shalhoub) conducts a series of interviews with a pleasant young man (Jim Gaffigan), probing for rage and neuroses that just aren't there. Of the many unstrung souls in "Wonderful," Dr. Trablous appears the most deluded, asking the perplexed Sandie if perhaps he's ever felt like giving his mother "a good kick, or shoving her head into the ground?"

"The Great New Wonderful" -- the title comes from the name of the cake designer's company -- follows these characters around for just under 90 minutes, gleaning sharp, unexpected insights and awaiting the inevitable moments of crises. The skies are a pristine September blue. Every so often a plane lazily crosses the sky. All it takes is an elevator momentarily shuddering to a halt to get the heart screaming again.

The movie is one of those generously cast lost-souls-in-the-big-city movies along the lines of 2004's "Heights" or 2001's "13 Conversations About One Thing"; it's also a quieter, less melodramatic piece of work than last year's "Crash," and arguably a better one.

The invisible 9/11 theme -- an unheard counter-melody -- gives the film weight and coherence. The jagged rift that opened that day between lives of privilege and utter chaos hasn't closed; it's just studiously ignored by people who can't understand why their nerves are shot. When the cake designer says "After everything that's happened, I can't believe nothing has changed," we're witnessing the tip of an incalculably large iceberg.

The film's an actor's playpen. Greer has been stuck so long in goofball supporting roles that she tears into this part -- a smart, loving mother frightened of her own son -- as if it were prime rib. Gyllenhaal allows us to recoil from her character's airy selfishness while letting us understand why it might be necessary. Dukakis plays a deft game of resentment and hope, and Shah is

delightful as a man so in love with America that he's blind to its snares. Stephen Colbert (of "The Colbert Report" and White House press-banquet eviscerations) brings the expected sneaky wit to his portrayal of an elementary school principal who knows from playground terrorism.

At the center is Dr. Trubolous, who's a saint or a psycho or both. Every movie should have Shalhoub in it; the actor gets nuances of bearing and behavior others don't even consider, and the royal fun he has -- even when playing serious -- is a rare thing. It's possible his character is the film's very own Buddha. True to that notion, you won't hear it from him.

The director of "The Great New Wonderful" is Danny Leiner, taking a big step up from teen comedies such as "Dude, Where's My Car?" and "Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle." He makes the transition with ease (though you could argue that "Harold and Kumar" had a grand stoner humanism of its own), and he's lucky to be working with this cast and a fine, subtle script by actor-turned-writer Sam Catlin.

Both men understand that even pampered New Yorkers are deserving of empathy, that everything in our culture and private lives is dedicated to burying despair, and that that fear needs to be dug out and dealt with if we're ever to go forward as wiser mortals. If not, why are we even living?