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C.O.G.

Jeanette Reedy Solano

California State University, Fullerton, jsolano@exchange.fullerton.edu

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C.O.G.

Abstract

This is a film review of *C.O.G.* (2013) directed by Kyle Patrick Alvarez.

Keywords

Homosexuality, Christianity

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C.O.G.

Director-screenwriter: Kyle Patrick Alvarez

(based on the essay by David Sedaris)

(U.S. Dramatic Competition)



Sundance was quite abuzz in anticipation over the first filmic adaptation of a David Sedaris work. The story follows privileged and preppy Yale grad student David (who dons the name "Samuel" for his escapade) on his Steinbeckian quest to work on an apple farm in the Pacific Northwest. The film is based on an essay in *Naked*, Mr. Sedaris's 1997 collection of essays. This sophomore effort by Kyle Patrick Alvarez is grounded by strong performances, however, it cannot support the weight a feature's narrative arc requires. While some performances are passionate, the film is not.

David Sedaris, beloved author and regular on NPR's *This American Life*, attended the screening in Sundance. He mused afterwards during the Q & A: "It was haunting ... and it's painful to be reminded of how pretentious and horrible I

was." Overall, Sedaris seemed pleased with the film. He granted the persistent Alvarez complete creative control in the adaptation and casting.

Traipsing through the rain-kissed apple orchards and small towns of Oregon while sorting out his sexuality, David ("Samuel") encounters Christians and even converts near the end of the film. From the very first scene when a crazed ex-con on the bus tries to sell him his jail-house Jesus to the schwarmy Jon the evangelist who befriends him in the second half of the film, religious folk are presented as unlikable stereotypes and frauds. The only exception to this is the mother figure Martha, well acted by a warm Casey Wilson. She allows Samuel to stay in her basement. While she may be the only genuinely compassionate friend Samuel meets, she lacks a backbone and fades to the background all too soon. Denis O'Hare (a strong character actor whose credits include recurring roles on *American Horror Story*, *True Blood*, and *The Good Wife*) does a superb job inhabiting the optimistic born-again street preacher, Jon, whose moments of mentoring and spiritual wisdom are perforated by his volcanic temper. His performance is the most nuanced of the film.

C.O.G. is witty at times and well acted and will be well received by diehard Sedaris fans. Supporting actors made the most of their screen time: Eloy Méndez, as the apple farm foreman Pedro is authentic and humorous; Corey Stoll

is a force of nature as a blue-collar stud curly; and Dale Dickey's wry and real factory worker Debbie is memorable.

Religious folk, or more specifically Evangelical Christians, are portrayed as shallow do-gooders who care more about appearances (dressing in your Sunday best) or handing out missionary literature like the C.O.G. tract that lures Samuel in, than caring for souls. After avoiding a rape by curly after a foxhole prayer, Samuel walks the infamous walk down the aisle of the church and gives his life over to Jesus. The pastor lays his hand on him at the front of the church and forces him to repeat after him. He ventures far beyond the expected "Sinner's prayer," however, and the new convert beseeches God to send him a wife very soon, so he can "marry, build a godly home, and raise children." Sedaris claims that his stories are based in his real life experiences, but I had to shake my head at this intentionally homophobic diatribe. Never, after witnessing hundreds of these church ritual moments, have I ever seen the new convert's covert sexuality addressed in a moment of conversion. Of course, Sedaris does admit that he embellishes and his tales are "realish"—this conversion scene must have been one of those moments. Soon thereafter, Samuel's Christian mentor Jon turns on him, calls him a faggot and literally kicks him out of the car; leaving the protagonist where he started: alone, on the road, still searching.

---Jeanette Reedy Solano