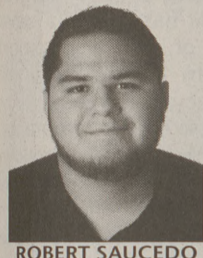




Garden State
Starring Zach Braff,
Natalie Portman &
Peter Sarsgaard
Fox Searchlight
Pictures



ROBERT SAUCEDO



PHOTO COURTESY OF FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

Moderately successful TV actor and lithium-addict "Large" (Braff) finds himself unexpectedly in his hometown and discovers Sam (Portman) by a twist of fate in the Braff-directed "Garden State."

One could easily compare "Garden State," recently released in theaters, to "Scrubs" on Prozac. "Garden State" shares brief sprouts of absurdity and whim with "Scrubs," an NBC sitcom starring the film's writer/director/actor Zach Braff, but instead of a laugh-a-minute situational comedy, "Garden State" relies on a delayed pace. "Garden State" uses a mixture of dry, dark humor that will leave audiences simultaneously reflecting on their own lives while laughing at the film's reserved comedy.

Further comparison of "Scrubs" and "Garden State" could be easily done, but it would be a disservice to the talented Braff, who has unleashed an impressive directorial debut.

Instead of "Scrubs," "Garden State" has more in common with the 1967 classic "The Graduate." Featuring two overwhelmed heroes attempting to figure out where their lives have left to go, both films resonate the era's mood. In today's over-medicated, oversensitive, overanxious lifestyle, Andrew Largeman (Braff) emerges as an unlikely spokesman for his generation.

Braff created for himself a plumb role with Largeman, a lethargic would-be actor (his one big role being that of a "retarded quarterback") churning out a living in a monochromatic Los Angeles, existing only with the usage of a multitude of medicinal downers.

When called upon to return home to New Jersey for his mother's funeral, he attempts to reconnect with a life that escaped him long ago. Largeman meanders through the film with a dazed look that hints at the emotions trapped beneath the drug-induced waking coma he has been trapped in by his psychiatrist father.

While in the Garden State, Largeman is reunited with friends and acquaintances from his youth. The people he encounters and the misadventures he wanders into will lead audiences to suspect New Jersey to be a proverbial cornucopia of oddities and miscreants.

Peter Sarsgaard excels in a nuance-filled performance as Mark, a childhood-chum-turned-gravedigger, who lives a Jerry Springer-approved lifestyle, alternately trading time between his three hobbies: collecting unusual "investments" (Gulf War trading cards among them), taking hits off his trusty bong and trading insults with his mother's boyfriend, an armored clad employee of a Medieval Times-themed restaurant. Natalie Portman plays Sam, a stranger who quickly evolves into

Largeman's love interest. Portman's portrayal of Sam should not work (the relationship is rushed and the wackiness of her performance is in direct conflict with the film's main tone), yet by the end of the film, there is a distinct chemistry between the actors, which creates an organic relationship that helps Largeman to come to terms with his life. Sam is a shining source of light that takes the bad with the good and is able to laugh at her life no matter what is thrown her way.

Largeman's apathetic views are met and balanced with Sam's unusual childhood filled with a Pet Cemetery in her backyard, Sally Struthers' adopt-a-child hotlines, ice-skating alligators and a dual case of epilepsy and compulsive lying.

Ian Holm offers an all too brief portrayal as Largeman's controlling psychiatrist/father. His role is small but is the driving force behind the film, compelling Largeman to seek some kind of peace for himself away from the drugs his father has prescribed to him since he was 10 years old. Alternately hilarious and insightful, the film is far from perfect. Braff attempts to strike a new career for himself in dramatic roles but cannot completely leave behind his career in broad comedy. Several outrageous moments sprinkled throughout the film seem almost out of place, but at the same time offer a well-meaning chuckle dropped into what some may find to be a monotonous movie.

Toward the end of the film, Braff falls upon a tendency to beat the story's message into audiences' minds with several all-too-obvious metaphors and symbols. After the fifth comparison of Largeman's life to the infinite abyss the film's characters discover, audiences will have gotten the director's message. Nobody must have told Braff that less is more when it comes to subtle themes, and he instead proclaims the film's final message so loud Helen Keller will have heard it in her grave. The film's ending seems forced and overly Hollywood, yet is a crowd-pleaser.

Time will eventually tell whether the film lives up to the shadows it has placed itself under in its self-comparison to "The Graduate." Highly entertaining, "Garden State" is a wonderful break from the high-octane summer flicks and the horror movies of the fall.

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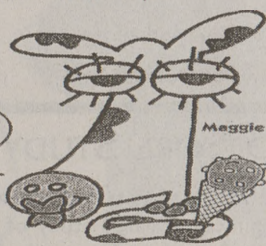
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