

# American Beauty does ugly right

Spacey gives a stellar performance in a great film

BY MARK EVANS

Color me surprised if a better film than this comes out this year — very surprised. While some good films come with a target audience (*Three Kings*, for one), there is really nothing about *American Beauty* that should keep anyone from being interested. This is one of those movies where even those who dislike it will grudgingly appreciate the point it is trying to make.

Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) is going to die. We don't know how, we don't know when, but *American Beauty* decides to go the route of *Sunset Boulevard* and reveal its ending in the opening scene of the movie.

This is fine though, because the point of a film like this is not the big secret ending but a fascinating look at people who are barreling towards a conclusion they know nothing about.

The film is about the kind of hell that can be hidden behind the facade of typical suburban America, and it presents two very different families.

Lester, his wife Carolyn (Annette Bening) and daughter Jane (Thora Birch) look like

normal folk on the outside. But Carolyn is a harsh critic, Jane is so self-conscious she's saving up for breast enlargement and Lester wants to feel young again so badly he becomes attracted to Angela (Mena Suvari), a considerably younger woman.

Disturbing as all that might sound, the next door neighbours make the Burnhams look like model citizens.

The Fitts' are made up of Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper), a former military man who has exactly the narrow world view you'd expect of a hardcore marine; mother, Barbara (Allison Janney), who is practically catatonic and son, Ricky (Wes Bentley), who spends almost all of his time filming things, especially Jane.

Where all this is headed is obvious at times, but at others it is quite shocking. Just because we know the ending, it doesn't mean that there aren't plenty of surprises in store. There are two twists towards the end that are completely out of left field and totally change our previous perceptions of the characters.

*American Beauty* is a film that depends on its cast and script, and both are flawless. Notably



Carolyn (Anette Bening) keeps it under control

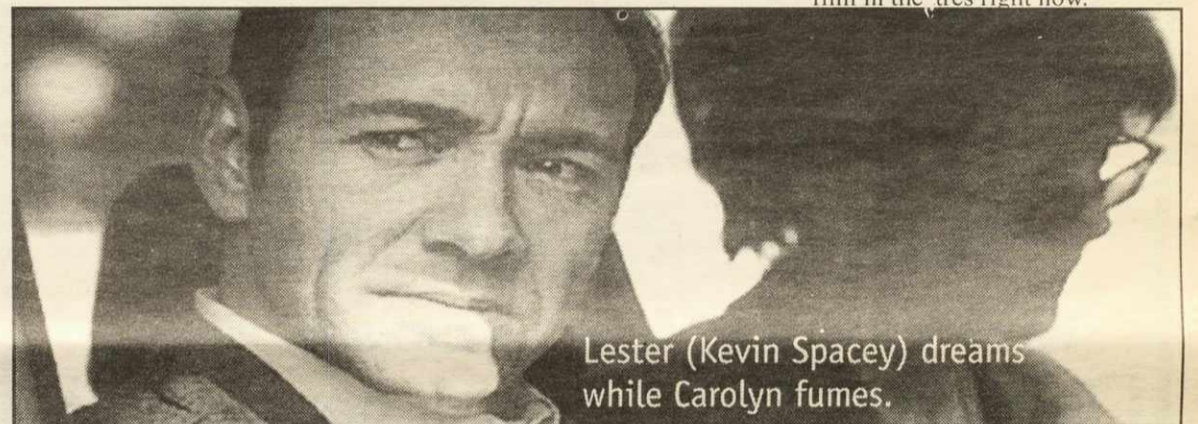
impressive is Spacey, who cements his reputation as one of the best actors in Hollywood today. His portrayal of Lester is nothing short of phenomenal and makes him the man to beat right now for Best Actor at next year's Academy Awards.

The script is smart and witty, with both daring and bite.

Although there are disturbing moments, *American Beauty* has plenty of solid laughs to make up for this. Even at its most caustic, the film still has a lot to say about what is important in life, and does so without descending into a sermon. The very last line goes a long way towards driving home just what *American Beauty* is

really about.

Bottom Line: See this film. We don't get many films of this calibre, and typically nobody goes to see them anyway. *American Beauty* deserves better, as it serves up top-notch entertainment while making an extremely profound point about where real beauty lies. Four out of four stars for the best film in the 'tres right now.



Lester (Kevin Spacey) dreams while Carolyn fumes.

## Something for the bird cage

Nova Scotia artist makes friends with the wildlife

BY DONNA LEE

Ever wanted to write your own book?

Here's a surefire method to success: sit in your backyard, give names to some birds, and observe *everything* for a while. And keep notes, that's also of importance. This prescription for literary success works for Linda Johns, who launched her book *For the*

*Birds* on October 6. This reviewer wouldn't necessarily call this work a 'book,' but more or less a long and cute nature journal.

Johns, a Nova Scotian painter, sculptor and writer, has been dubbed "The Bird Lady." She takes injured birds and wildlife under her wing, nurses them to health and releases them. While they recover, she is inspired to carve sculptures or write.

The author has done things

not many of us have — for one, she has pressed her face into an owl in order to smell its feathers. Johns also elaborates on the most minute details of her bird adventures, ad nauseam.

You might enjoy Johns' book if you are passionate about animals, especially those of the domesticated and feathered kinds. Then again, a brief trip to your own backyard could provide a similar experience.

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