

American archetypes at work in new release

# Insignificance: rave cinematic treat

**Insignificance**  
**Island Alive**  
**West Mall Phase**  
**III Cineplex**

review by John Charles

Nicholas Roeg is the ultimate director of collage, as a glance at his career reminds us. He was a cinematographer for a number of stunning movies such as *Far From the Madding Crowd*, but his most significant work was on Richard Lester's *Petulia*. A 1968 movie, with Julie Christie and George C. Scott, *Petulia* used a fragmented visual style, which included the first appearance of flashforwards as well as flashbacks. And these techniques, dazzlingly edited into an almost subliminal commentary on the plot, constitute the striking visual style Roeg has since used in all his movies.

Roeg's films are always fascinating to watch, but their success ultimately depends upon how necessary his techniques are to the story he's telling.

His masterpiece, *Don't Look Now*, took a rather genteel Daphne DuMaurier short story about a couple's grief over their dead little boy, and turned it into a brilliant vision of dread and predestination, set in beautiful, rotting Venice which finally becomes a vast tomb. Even when Roeg showed his couple (Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland) tenderly making love, he edited in shots of them getting dressed afterwards, but each now alone. The sense of the outcome of every human act being known — completed before it has begun — creates a cumulative sense of despair which make this a stunning if depressing movie.

None of his other movies have required that style so exactly. *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession* is a powerful movie, but its narrative and visual trickiness are often self-conscious, making things loom with a cosmic significance that just isn't there. If the viewer has to work hard to put the story together, the story had better be worth it.

Roeg's latest movie, *Insignificance*, is not that much work, and it is worth it. This time Roeg has taken a play by Terry Johnson, (performed at London's prestigious, avant-garde Royal Court Theatre) and filmed it.

The play (and Johnson's screenplay) is a farce about American culture heroes in the 1950s. The characters are based on Einstein, Marilyn Monroe, and Joe DiMaggio (Monroe's husband at the time), and there's also a U.S. senator working for Joe MacCarthy, and a Nobel Savage. But they're treated here as archetypes of fame, and are here called The Professor (Michael Emil), The Actress (Theresa Russell), The Senator (Tony Curtis), and The Ballplayer (Gary Busey).

The show takes place in two New York hotel rooms during one night, and in that time we hear a lot of funny and complicated



talk from these characters.

In the two most memorable scenes, Actress demonstrates relativity to Professor, with the aid of toys and flashlights, and Ballplayer explains fame to Professor through his constant appearance on bubble-gum baseball cards.

The movie's look — especially the sets — are deliberately banal and washed out, to capture the '50s sensibility Johnson's play is all about. But there's still lots of fancy editing, as each character has tiny flashbacks into their childhood which show us they've become the adults you'd expect. The guilt Professor feels as a scientist over the A-bomb is shown too, but his glimpses of Hiroshima are visions more than flashbacks.

The humor and playfulness are exuberantly handled, and all the performances are fine, save for Russell. She's good in her lighter scenes, but when the pressure's on she becomes pretty phoney — especially since she's doing a Monroe impersonation instead of an imaginative evocation. There's a dumbness about Russell that keeps coming through her performances (as in Roeg's last flick, *Eureka*). I kept wishing Roeg had cast Kathleen Turner, who might have been great.

The political aspects of *Insignificance* are a bit dubious. The idea that the private lives of public figures can tell us about public policies is true up to a point, but this play doesn't take it very far. Nor is this the first time it's



Above: The Professor (Michael Emil) and The Senator (Tony Curtis) Inset: Theresa Russell as The Actress

been suggested that the origins of "the problems of the '80s," can be traced to the '50s, where the obsession with stars and the famous spreads from the entertainment world to politics, and bland American attitudes mask attempts to escape the spectre of The Bomb.

The Professor's vision of an A-bomb blast

destroying The Actress and the hotel is a powerful coda to the movie (and reminiscent of the conclusion of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*) But the scene's length, and its slow motion beauty, suggests Roeg's response to his film's themes is more aesthetic than political. And that's the best way to approach this very funny little film.

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