

Judith's journey of self-discovery



Susan Sarandon is Judith, the frustrated housewife.

Compromising Positions

Columbia Pictures

Garneau Theatre

by John Charles

Compromising Positions looks like a comic mystery thriller at first, but it's not.

Susan Sarandon plays Judith, a Long Island housewife whose dentist gets murdered in the film's opening scene. And though Judith wants to know whodunnit, Frank Perry's movie is more interested in Judith herself.

The result is a very likeable, intelligent little movie.

Her dentist, Bruce (Joe Mantegna), made a mild pass at her once, but she ignored it. But now that he's dead, and his reputation as a perpetual Romeo is out in the open, she's intrigued — even obsessed. Why would all these well-off women fall for a guy who wears "gold chains and a pinky ring"? More, how could they be unfaithful and still be wives, mothers — shoppers in grocery stores?

Judith's journey of self-discovery is not made explicit in the script, but Sarandon's wide-eyed intensity as she talks to people — especially female friends — conveys the sense that they're all possibilities for her, and she's trying to figure out what she wants.

One scene shows her in a health club. All the other women are running on a treadmill, while Judith stands aside wondering what to do. Her dilemma is summed up in that brief shot.

Her best married friend, Nancy (Judith Ivey), is an earthy artist who creates trendy sculptures, and is sleeping with a young cop she calls Cupcake. She thinks Judith should have an affair, since she's "in control." But Judith declines, even when someone she really likes comes along.

Significantly, in the 1978 novel the movie is based on, Judith went through with the affair. But Perry and author/screenwriter Susan Isaacs didn't like the scene once they'd filmed it, because Sarandon's approach made it seem unnecessary. According to them (in a *N.Y. Times* interview), adultery is out-of-date

for women trying to re-define themselves! (There are a lot of people out there who obviously haven't been told.)

Movies about housewives discovering themselves seldom make my Ten Best list, (unless they're as funny as *Desperately Seeking Susan*), because they're usually soap operatic and thin. Novelists can do much more with such material, because in movies the subtleties get smoothed out.

Perry himself made a typical one in 1970, *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, in which Carrie Snodgrass *did* have the obligatory affair.

What makes *Positions* work so well is that Sarandon never takes herself too seriously. Her problems are pointed out to us in a big speech by her husband Bob (Edward Herrmann), a corporate lawyer who's nearly always busy.

"Every few months you have a feminist crisis," he explodes, "and you say, 'There's a hole in my life, and you're not filling it.'"

That helps us understand her exasperation with Bob, but we also see that the solution must come from her — not from Bob being a



Raul Julia plays a police lieutenant.

more considerate husband.

Before Judith had her two children, she was a journalist, and with Bruce's murder case in her lap, she starts pretending she's still a reporter in order to pursue the case. And as it progresses she finds purpose of an undomestic sort coming back into her life.

Perry has attained an excellent cast, most of them Broadway actors. Herrmann is especially good, bringing a depth and intelligence to a role that could be stereotypical. Ivey has many drolly funny lines, but it's a pity that after one tantalizing glimpse of her enigmatic sculptures, they're never seen again, much less used as a visual reference.

Raul Julia plays with real warmth the police lieutenant Judith is drawn to, and the slight resemblance between him and the dentist suggests that Judith's imagination was ignited by Bruce on some level.

Barry Sonnenfeld's photography (*Blood Simple*) is accomplished, and the interior decoration of the homes Judith visits makes pointed and satiric comment on the people who live there. For once, a new movie that shows us its story rather than just telling it.



Compromising Positions: showing a story rather than just telling it.



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