

ARTS / CULTURE

An offbeat Hollywood comedy, *Rushmore* a pleasure to watch

BY KARAN SHETTY

Alternately referred to as "dorks", "geeks" or "losers", common high-school nerds often find consolation in the fact that if they actually survive those cruel high school years they earn salaries that far outstrip those of their classmates. We call them names, give them wedgies and shove their heads down toilets but we also envy

their intelligence. At the end of the day they get the last laugh as they prove that the meek do indeed inherit the Earth.

But what happens when a student with all the social awkwardness of a nerd is not blessed with intelligence? What happens when there is no intellectual crutch to support the morale, when a nerd can't take solace in thinking, "Well at least

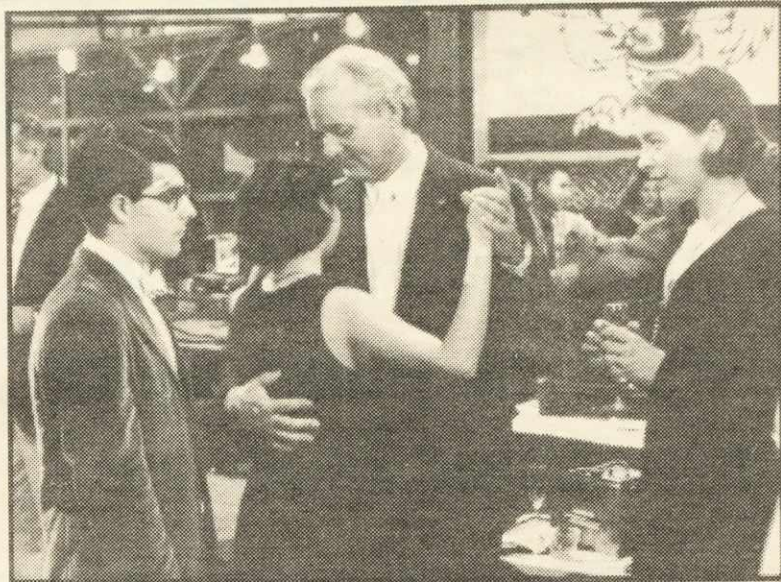
I'm smarter than they are"?

Enter *Rushmore Academy's* Max Fischer, president or founder of every club the school has to offer, but also, quite possibly the institution's worst student.

When Miss Cross, the school's first-grade teacher on whom Max has a crush, says she majored in Latin American Studies, Max tells her in all seriousness that Latin should never have been dropped from the school's curriculum. Played brilliantly by first-time actor Jason Schwartzmann (Nic Cage's nephew), Max is that guy in class who always raises his hand when the teacher asks who wants to run the filmstrip projector.

Max's enterprising nature soon brings him to the attention of jaded steel magnate and *Rushmore* alumnus Herman Blume (Bill Murray). Blume develops a liking for Max as he sees in him an energy or vitality which is missing from his own life. Sure he's rich, but after taking a long hard look at his two dumb-jock sons and his cheating wife he realizes that his life has come to a dead end. Things turn sour for Blume and Max though when they realize that they both have feelings for Miss Cross (Olivia Williams) and try to out-compete each other for her attention.

Unlike other films in which a nerd is the protagonist, like the Todd Solondz's Sundance hit *Welcome to the Doll's House*, the focus of *Rushmore* is not really on how Max copes with being a nerd in an appearance-oriented culture. Instead, the film chooses to explore



CROSS PURPOSES: *Rushmore* digs into the consequences of the nerd as hero.

Max's character as it stands on its own — the nerdiness is implied.

"I like people who get obsessed with something," says Owen Wilson, who wrote the film with director Wes Anderson. "There's something funny about those kinds of characters. They don't have the self-awareness of how they're coming across to others and how strange they are. Max Fischer wants to be considered an expert in every conceivable field. He wants to run the whole operation. And he does not allow the fact that he is not very skilled in most of these areas to dampen his enthusiasm or prevent him from trying to dominate all of them."

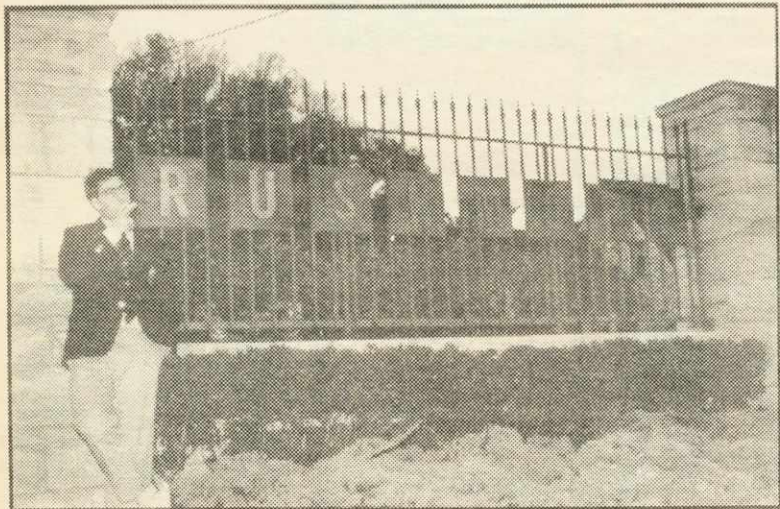
Granted, there are a few token beatings, but this film is not a sob story about how tough it is to be a geek. Rather, it is an exploration of one nerd's neurosis.

In a newspaper interview, director Wes Anderson claimed that he wanted the film to have the feel of a Roald Dahl children's book. In this capacity, Anderson is definitely successful. *Rushmore* is shot in a style which evokes images of

Dahl's novels, complete with the Quentin Blake illustrations. Also, the children in the film interact with the adults on the same intellectual plain. Unlike most other films, where children are given flat one-dimensional roles, the precocious kids of *Rushmore* are characterized quite richly.

Like the Solondz movie, or even a film like *Boogie Nights*, *Rushmore* is full of subtle humour. Examples include Max's ultra-violent stage adaptations of movies which were never meant for the theatre (*Serpico*, *Heaven and Hell*). When *Rushmore Academy's* principal threatens Max with sudden death academic probation, Max replies that he'll make up for it by doing a post-graduate year. A terrible student, he tells Miss Cross that Oxford and the Sorbonne are his top two choices with Harvard as his safety. I can go on...

Don't go into *Rushmore* expecting the broad comedy typical of a Bill Murray movie or you'll be sorely disappointed. Let the film lead you on its own meandering path and you'll have a good time.



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