

# Rolling Stone

## JUDY BERLIN: Small, Simple and Sensational

*Edie Falco of "The Sopranos" shines as a wanna-be actress in a suburban dead end*



Some movies are too good to miss. *Judy Berlin* is one of them. I first saw writer-director Eric Mendelsohn's funny, touching and vital debut feature a year ago at the Sundance Film Festival. Audiences cheered; Mendelsohn, 35, won the Best Director award; great things were predicted. Then nothing – until now. Thanks to a deal between Loews Cineplex Entertainment and the Shooting Gallery, a gutsy young company run

by Larry Meistrich, *Judy Berlin* leads off a series that will bring indie films to major markets starting this month. Hallelujah. As concepts go, it sure beats another sequel to *Scream*.

The trick is to get audiences to see a black-and-white movie, shot in less than a month for under \$500,000, with a harpsichord score and a plot that covers one day in the New York suburb of Babylon, Long Island, where ordinary

people go about their ordinary lives. Oh, there is a special effect: A solar eclipse cloaks the day in darkness, making the ordinary seem weirdly unfamiliar.

It works like magic. Mendelsohn, a Long Island native who began his career as a costume assistant for Woody Allen, has a born filmmaker's gift for blending words and images into a uniquely lyrical and profound vision. And the actors, each one pitch-perfect, keep springing surprises.

Edie Falco is a joy as Judy. It's a kick to see this remarkable actress – the long-suffering mob wife on TV's hottest show, *The Sopranos* – tear into a part that brings out her youthful comic exuberance. When Judy, a local actress with more optimism than talent, first runs into her former high school classmate David Gold (Aaron Harnick, excellent as a stand-in for Mendelsohn), she's about to leave town to make it in Los Angeles. The just-turned-thirty David, whose L.A. directing career tanked, has crawled back to lick his wounds at the home of his parents, Arthur (Bob Dishy), a quiet

school principal, and Alice (Madeline Kahn), a housewife who speaks mostly to hear herself talk.

It sounds like a setup for a sitcom. "That thing under my nose is getting bigger," says hypochondriac Alice to her husband. "That's your mouth," he answers dryly. But there's no hiding the emptiness of their marriage. Or David's shame over his failure. Or Judy's strained relationship with her mother, Sue (Barbara Barrie), a schoolteacher who sniffs at the ambitions of Judy, a comical figure who wears adult braces.

Mendelsohn exposes the secret hearts of these townsfolk one by one even as the eclipse covers their lives in shadows. Arthur kisses Sue at school, kindling long-unspoken feelings. It's a master class in acting from Barrie and Dishy – watch the way he hesitantly touches her coat before the kiss. And watch Barrie's play of emotions when Sue gets slapped by Dolores (the superb Bette Henritze), a retired teacher with Alzheimer's whom Sue tries to shoo out of her classroom. "You're rude, and everybody says so," says Dolores, the truth stinging Sue harder than the slap.

Kahn, who died of cancer in December, gives a final performance that

brims over with humor and heartbreak. Seeing Arthur drive off to school, Alice jokes to a neighbor, "The man left me. I was too much for him. I ground him down." Kahn says the lines lightly, but her face finds the gravity in the words, the fear that they might be true.

Judy and David say their farewells at the train station, unlikely lovers who will probably always miss connections. How can David express his his feelings? "Make a movie," says Judy, shooting him a wave as she boards the train. That wistful note of longing in her voice packs an unexpected emotional wallop. But then, I shouldn't be surprised. *Judy Berlin* had me from hello.

Left: Edie Falco, Aaron Harnick.  
Below: The late Madeline Kahn.

