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***This Beautiful City* at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

Sally Franson on Saturday 04/05/2008 2:30 pm , (5) Recommendations

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A woman stands on the ledge of a balcony and hurtles to the ground as her husband does the dishes inside. A prostitute and her ex-junkie boyfriend find her on the ground, and a policeman arrives to call for help. Three months later the lives of these seemingly disparate characters ruthlessly collide once more.

Such is the premise of Ed Gass-Donnelly's first feature, *This Beautiful City*, which premiered last year at the Toronto International Film Festival. In Gass-Donnelly's Toronto, life is cheap, and the characters struggle to stay afloat, regardless of class or social status.

Set in a neighborhood on the verge of gentrification, sleek condominiums loom over junkies on trash-filled streets. Yet the castle above is made of ice, as we see in the first scene, as architect-husband Harry subtly chastises wife Carol at every opportunity in front of their yuppie party guests. She steps outside to sneak a cigarette and, as she later tells policeman Peter, "I leaned out, and for one second everything was fun again." The already fragile union with Harry dissolves further in the months to follow, as he struggles with professional pressures and doubts Carol's insistence that the fall was accidental. She, in turn, seeks warmth outside their frigid marriage with the struggling-but-loving Peter, whose daughter ran away and is somewhere on the streets.

Meanwhile, boyfriend Johnny struggles to save prostitute Pretty from a drug addiction and her often-horrifying encounters with patrons. Yet white knight he is not, essentially pimping her for rent money and reckoning with his own addict demons. Harry takes an interest in Pretty as part of some idealistic neighborliness, but she scorns his clumsy intentions. "Are you trying to make me feel small?" she asks him when he takes her to a fancy restaurant, and then laughs in his face when he tells her she is worth more than sex.

At time difficult to watch for its unflinching portrayal of urban life, *This Beautiful City* refuses to indulge in false hope or happy endings, choosing instead to dwell upon the messiness of cultures clashing and the divisiveness of class. Life is fragile here, ropes fray fast, and the result is a film that is as volatile as it is honest.

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