



Reviews

You Can Say Vagina

(Mischa Baka & Siobhan Jackson, Australia, 2018)

*Underpants Dance*

The camera stays still, and this is a blessing. Having just watched Julian Schnabel's *At Eternity's Gate* (2018), where the camera "impressionistically" wobbles and lurches everywhere, senselessly, in almost every shot in the name of some spurious "subjectivity" effect (the director's self merged with the character's, who knows?), I was grateful for the precision of the frames fashioned by Mischa Baka & Siobhan Jackson in their low-budget, debut feature. It's an observational style, empathetic yet nailing down, in each scene, the intersubjective diagram of push and pull, effort and withdrawal. There's a kinship here with the American work of Dan Sallitt (*The Unspeakable Act*, 2012), but nudged more toward comedy.

What's in the frames? The excruciating tension of shyness, embarrassment, lack of any confidence or self-certainty. In the story's opening moments, young Lucy (Lucy Orr) impulsively changes her name to Ruby. She's landed in Melbourne, has gotten away from her family – especially her pregnant, guilt-tripping Mum. But Ruby knows no one, and is clumsily carting around her things until she bumps into a reasonably pleasant, helpful guy (Jesse Richards). However, no social interaction here is easy: awkward silences, endless apologies and crossed wires ensue.

Ruby has nothing in Melbourne: no home, no job, no friends, no contacts. Even her attempt at an exercise workout must be performed tentatively, in the air, sitting at a cybercafé terminal. Things start to change for her when she moves in with an old codger (Tom McMathie), possibly an ex-hippie type, who mainly flops around the house in his dressing gown, looking fairly frazzled. An interaction of sorts develops: he bops along privately, secretly watching on from outside Ruby's bedroom, as she plays and sings a song (her own) with headphones clamped tightly on her head; as if in response, he later rewards her with a karaoke set-up in the lounge room, and she is delighted.

But there's also an odd and pretty old-fashioned power and gender dynamic installing itself, without a word, here: Ruby finds herself removing the pips from her housemate's freshly squeezed orange juice, and applying elbow massages to his back. She takes it all without complaining, as she tends to do with everyone and everything – until the emotionally devastating final scene, in a car in the rain.

Watching the back and forth between Ruby and the various people in her life (it's hard to catch on to several characters' names), I remembered some of cinema's poets of melancholia, hesitation, awkwardness and embarrassment: Hal Hartley, Luc Moullet, Roy Andersson ... all of whom tend to use static frames and long takes, and project a mordant view of constrictive social roles. They also have a special affinity for the "nobodies", the disappointed and discarded of the working (or even lower) classes. *You Can Say Vagina* is poignant, without being heavy-handed, in this regard: only the glimpse of a relatively luxurious "house sitting" episode lifts us, momentarily, out of the drab, ordinary world of house-sharing, shitty casual jobs and half-hearted attempts at "self-improvement" (such as when the codger "spruces himself up", and even gets properly dressed for a change, for a visitor). It's a world in which everyone is "nice" – sort of – but nothing is ecstatic or fulfilling. On this level, *You Can Say Vagina* succeeds far better than most of Mike Leigh's movies (such as *Career Girls*, 1997) that try to inhabit the same space.

Ruby is faced with a curious panoply of men and women. On the female side, there's her mother; and her dance teachers, who seem to mainly propose to her a kind of free-form "personal movement" expression – which she then adapts in the shape of a quasi-sexy dance presentation where she discreetly peels off a dozen pairs of underpants underneath her too-flowing skirt. We see this show performed twice: for the old guy (for some minutes, we're not entirely sure whose bare foot that really is along the bottom of the frame), who likes it and rewards her with an awkward kiss on the forehead; and for the young "love interest" flagged in the early street scenes.

Is this a romantic comedy angle? Not on your life. The young guy's somewhat freaked-out reaction to the underpants dance spells the looming end of his not very erotic or romantic attachment to Ruby. Plus, he has also invasively strayed into the other, separate part of her life, her other awkward interaction with a man: the passive-aggressive sound recordist/audio artist (it's hard to say what he exactly is or does) played by Josh Price, who gets Ruby to offer, in his studio, verbal descriptions of (presumably) porno footage – hence the title, signalling the moment when Ruby has to learn, in a split-second, to say "vagina" instead of "that area" or some other inhibited circumlocution.

Orr is marvellous as Lucy/Ruby; her body language is an amazing study. She's so quiet, so introverted, strangles her own voice so completely that, sometimes, even the filmmakers' own microphone has trouble picking up what she's saying. The effect of excruciation is thereby extended to the viewer: I found myself crouching forward in my seat – just as I would in a real-life interaction with such a shy, nervous, scrunched-up person – to try to catch her mumbled, apologetic phrases. That is, until the final scene, when she climbs into the back seat of her semi-boyfriend's car and really let's go with a sobbing soliloquy. It's so strong that *You Can Say Vagina* knows it needs to let us breathe out with a final, sad, extended, oh-so-banal streetscape shot. All the difficulty of an ordinary, unglamorous, frustrated life is condensed in that shot.

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