

Henry & June

by Alice Griffin

Trilby and trenchcoat-clad men may pick this film up hoping for the titillation and tantalisation for which the story of Henry and June has been famed, and sometimes criticised for, only to be sorely disappointed as there is so much more to this smoothly articulated movie which you must get through, before any exploration of the act of sex.

Based on the real-life diary of Anais Nin, writer, diarist and a woman renowned as one of the finest examples of writers of female erotica, the scenes are simply laced with subtle provocativeness and dusted with just a sprinkling of sensual couplings. Hardcore it most certainly is not.

Nin moved to Paris in the 20's and this film is based on her diary at the time. Married to a good, dependable ... and boring ... banker, Hugo, played by Richard E. Grant, she dreams of sexual awakening and of meeting people "who are alive". Hungry for experience, for love, for feeling and for the ability to understand her own desires, Anais falls into the world of enigmatic writer, Henry Miller, played by Fred Ward. At first captivated by his sultry - if a little screwed up - wife, June, played by the hauntingly beautiful Uma Thurman, Nin quickly embraces the limbs of Mr Miller himself when June disappears to New York to forge her career as an actress. This film explores the passion and pain found within a highly-charged triangular relationship where June is the muse of both Nin, and Miller and where poor old Hugo fails to come up to scratch.

The beauty of this piece of work is in the filming. The scenes flow elegantly on from one another with a sensuality running deep beneath the surface. Maria de Medeiros's performance as Anais Nin evokes an innocent sexuality throughout, drawing in all the characters toward her and although at times it seems as if Anais is the poor shy victim pulled into a world of whores and frivolousness of emotion in fact, she is the one constructing the web. However, somewhat disappointingly Medeiros fails to develop the character further and rather than convincingly coming alive through her

sexual awakening, she retains the inexperienced sexually innocent air, which does become a little boring. Even when she attempts to take control of her sometime lover Eduardo and demands, in a disturbing husky voice reminiscent of Miller, "I want to show you something ... I want to teach you things" I was left laughing and thinking 'please, add some of the passion this exploration deserves!' Thurman also had a big transition to make with her character, June. From hard-nosed worldly bitch she then had to convince me that she really was hurt and traumatised by the two people, Nin and Miller, whom she loved deeply, going behind her back. Her sincerity was not real enough for me and quite a big u-turn from the supposed liberal thinking that she prided herself on, or maybe it was the god-awful Brooklyn accent that failed to convince me?

What you do get in this movie, though, is a great deal of atmospheric darkness, a glimpse into the decadence of Bohemian Parisian life in the 30's, some rather disturbing moments where Richard E. Grant tries to be wickedly sensual and animalistic ... and fails, miserably, and a whole lot of Miller screwing with his hat on, yet unfortunately quite dispassionately and uninterestingly. This is odd considering he is portrayed as the epitome of sexual debauchery at that time with his books being banned for obscenity.

Having previously read the book I had constructed the scenes in my own head before seeing the film and although the gorgeous cinematography matched my imagination, the characters were not real or convincing enough and the moments of supposed sexual awakening, such as when Hugo and Anais visit a brothel and pay to watch two girls make out, become almost rushed 'token' aspects of the film. But then, I suppose this was possibly right for the characters, as like I said, they failed also to develop in the way you would imagine.