

FILM REVIEWS

Scrapbook

(Drama)

A Fragile Entertainment presentation of a Ronnie Eguia/Andrew Borakove production. Produced by Roni Eguia, Andrew Borakove, Kurt Kuenne. Executive producer, Richard Kuenne.

Directed, written, edited by Kurt Kuenne. Camera (color), Dominique A. Faix; music, Kuenne; production designers, Celia Parker, Christine Mueller, Tammy Banal; sound (Dolby), Kuenne; associate producer, Fonda Anita; casting, James Scott, Vicki Goggin. Reviewed at Palm Springs Film Festival, Jan. 8, 1999. Running time: 110 MIN.

Curt Martin Justin Urich
 Andy Martin Eric Balfour
 Jake Chadwick Palmatier
 Lisa Keili Lefkowitz
 Tyler Jed Rhein
 Norm Brandon Peterson
 Hank Aaron Nomakchiensky
 Roy Martin Michael Rothhaar
 Sarah Martin Jordana Capra

By LAEL LOEWENSTEIN

Four-fifths of this arresting indie about a misunderstood youth lashing out at the world around him takes familiar themes and handles them in fresh, inventive ways. Pic would seem a natural for an arthouse distributor looking to nurture fresh talent and will certainly serve as a proud calling card for director-writer-editor-composer Kurt Kuenne.

The 25-year-old Kuenne caught the eye of August Coppola with his cult hit "On the Air," a feature he made in high school about two brothers' relationship. That project provided the inspiration and characters for "Scrapbook," which retains its high school setting but spins a completely new tale around the siblings.

Curt Martin (Justin Urich) has grown up in the shadow of his older

brother Andy (Eric Balfour). Whereas the popular and talented Andy has no problem getting dates, Curt is shy and awkward. At Andy's urging, Curt auditions for the school musical and, to his surprise, wins the lead role.

Bitterly dropping out of the cast when he overhears that his brother pulled strings to get him the part, Curt takes over as piano accompanist and soon falls for the play's female lead, the honey-voiced Lisa (Keili Lefkowitz).

Kuenne builds Curt and Lisa's awkward courtship in risky, disarming ways, with unexpected comedy and astute use of camera and editing. When the two share their first kiss, it seems Curt may have finally found a soulmate.

However, sibling rivalry builds dramatically when Lisa comes over for a family meal only to see Andy belittle his brother. Curt's resentment deepens when Andy, having assumed the play's male lead, turns an innocent stage smooch with Lisa into much more; a deft montage of successive performances shows their embrace becoming increasingly passionate and painful to Curt.

Andy's betrayal begets a series of events that eventually cause Curt to fall in with the wrong crowd. This deepens the brothers' rift and prompts Curt to take a final, vengeful act against his brother.

Up until the last reel, Kuenne strikes a compelling balance of youthful angst and surprisingly mature humor. Often, just when it seems he's about to lower himself to the prosaic level of an afternoon TV special, he subverts expectations with inspired dialogue and plot developments. Only near the end does he go too far with

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an overwrought chase scene that culminates in maudlin tragedy, disappointing in a film that, until this point, flirts with cliches but rarely indulges in them.

Pic is also shot in ways that surprise. Lisa and Curt's breakup, for instance, presents a highly familiar situation. But instead of shooting inside the car as the lovers quarrel, Kuenne places his camera on the car's hood and muffles their dialogue with the engine's growl, allowing the actors' facial expressions and gestures convey the scene's content. Likewise, the hand-held camera that documents Curt and Andy's fistfight lends a certain edginess and gritty sense of urgency to the proceedings.

Thesping is impressive and modulated all around in this nicely cast pic. Urich's anti-hero Curt retains an inner strength that keeps him from spinning completely out of control. As Andy, Balfour credibly swings between selfishness and brotherly protectiveness. And Chadwick Palmatier finds pockets of humor in the otherwise menacing character of the chief school bully.

Kuenne's well-structured script frames scenes that reveal character, advance the storyline and shed light on the complexities of male bonding. Music, also by Kuenne, underscores the film's emotional realism and enhances the action.