



Unlock the Power of Hollywood

[Home](#) > [Winter Solstice](#)

Posted: Tue., May 4, 2004, 6:12pm PT

Winter Solstice

A Sound Pictures production. Produced by John M. Limotte, Doug Bernheim. Executive producers, Anthony LaPaglia, Jodi Peikoff. Co-producer, George Paaswell. Directed, written by Josh Sternfeld.

Jim Winters - Anthony LaPaglia
 Gabe Winters - Aaron Stanford
 Pete Winters - Mark Webber
 Molly Ripkin - Allison Janney
 Stacey - Michelle Monaghan
 Robbie - Brendan Sexton III
 Mr. Bricker - Ron Livingston
 Steve - Ebon Moss-Bachrach

By [DAVID ROONEY](#)

A minor-key drama about loss, adjustment and the fragile yet enduring bonds of family, "Winter Solstice" represents an accomplished debut for writer-director Josh Sternfeld, a New York U. Graduate Film Program alumnus. Story of a still-grieving widower and his two troubled teenage sons is distinguished by its emotional integrity, sustained mood of aching melancholy and superbly understated performances. The television popularity of thespians Anthony LaPaglia and Allison Janney should help secure a theatrical sale for this unsentimental yet moving indie feature.

Developed at the 2001 Sundance Institute Screenwriters Lab, Sternfeld's debut on paper recalls any number of intimate dramas that surface each year in Park City. But like Karen Moncrieff's "Blue Car" from 2002, this is a superior example, showcasing a director with a gift for sensitive observation and narrative economy, a pleasing sense of composition and a strong guiding hand with the ensemble cast.

Jim Winters (LaPaglia) is a landscape gardener living with his sons Gabe (Aaron Stanford) and Pete (Mark Webber) in leafy New Jersey suburbia. While no direct reference is made to Jim's wife or her death in an accident five years earlier until more than an hour into the movie, the unspoken weight of her absence is as palpable a character as anyone else on screen.

Jim declines friendly attempts by neighbors to set him up on dates, while Pete, who has a hearing impairment, has stopped focusing on his schoolwork, sliding into disastrous grades and standard slacker malaise. Gabe has a loving relationship with his sweet-souled girlfriend, Stacey (Michelle Monaghan), but nonetheless feels similarly disengaged. The family receives a jolt when Gabe announces his intention to uproot and move in with a friend in Florida.

Relatively little happens in Sternfeld's screenplay, the rewards of which lie in its intelligent refusal to offer artificial, clean solutions or to broadcast the characters' conflicts in big, showy scenes. Instead, the writer-director coaxes out their fear, bitterness, hostility and sorrow through small revelations or telling silences.

Relationships and connections are tenderly drawn, notably the fractiousness mixed with deep solidarity that binds the brothers, Stacey's poignant retreat from Gabe as soon as his departure is announced, and Jim's difficulty in reaching out to his sons while still hurting from his own emotional scars. But despite the sadness that hangs over much of the movie, this is a profoundly optimistic drama, represented by Gabe's choice to find a new environment with less painful memories, Pete's tentative communication with a summer-school teacher (Ron Livingston) and Jim's first flickers of romantic interest in a new neighbor (Janney).

While Janney does a fine job etching a bright, sensitive woman open to new experience, both her character and that of Livingston are a little underutilized. But performances from the entire cast are hard to fault. LaPaglia's restrained turn easily stands alongside his impressive work in "Lantana," while Stanford ("Tadpole") and Webber convey damage and vulnerability with subtle strokes. Both actors are well served by Sternfeld's sharp ear for dialogue and his grasp of the awkward surliness and reticence of youth.

Harlan Bosmajian's graceful lensing captures the stillness, soft light and surface tranquility of the suburbs, editor Plummy Tucker lays out the short, quietly loaded scenes in an unhurried, flowing pace, and John Levanthal's guitar music provides gentle accompaniment.

Camera (color), Harlan Bosmajian; editor, Plummy Tucker; music, John Levanthal; production designer, Jody Asnes; set decorator, Lisa Kent; costume designer, Paola Weintraub; sound (Dolby), Brian Miksis; associate producer/assistant director, Amanda Slater; casting, Amanda Koblin, Amanda Harding. Reviewed at Magno screening room, New York, April 12, 2004. (In Tribeca Film Festival -- competing.) Running time: 93 MIN.

Read the full article at:

<http://www.variety.com/story.asp?l=story&r=VE1117923746&c=31>

Like this article? Variety.com has over 100,000 articles, 35,000 reviews and 10,000 pages of charts. Subscribe today!

<http://www.variety.com/emailfriend>

or call (866) MY-VARIETY.

Can't commit? Sign up for a free 14-day trial!

<http://www.variety.com/emailfriend>

© 2004 Reed Business Information © 2004 Variety, Inc.
 Use of this Website is subject to [Terms of Use](#). [Privacy Policy](#)