



PLEASANTVILLE

Released: 1998 by New Line Cinema

Produced by: Gary Ross, John Kilik, Robert J. Degus
and Steven Soderbergh

Screenplay: Gary Ross

Music: Randy Newman

Director of Photography: John Lindley

Directed by: Gary Ross

Starring: Tobey Maguire, Jeff Daniels, Joan Allen,
William H. Macy, J. T. Walsh, Don Knotts, Marley
Shelton, Jane Kaczmarek, Reese Witherspoon

Rated: PG-13

Pleasantville is a hard film to pigeonhole. Some may think it's a film about the Fifties. Others may view it as an exercise in "way cool" color effects in a black and white medium. Still others will deride the film's portrayal of the death of morality in a simple, innocent society—sort of like the tainting of Eden. Yet, *Pleasantville* manages to work on all these levels at once, while still giving the viewer more than what lies on the surface.

Gary Ross, the producer/writer/director of *Pleasantville* makes no bones about the fact he was trying to make a statement. On the DVD director's commentary, he comes right out and says he was brought up in a home where his mother and father embraced all sorts of liberal causes, at one point leading to his screenwriter father being blacklisted. What impresses me, however, is that Ross avoids clubbing the viewer over the head with his ideas, opting for a more subtle approach of letting the film's characters speak for themselves.

On the subject of characters, watch for some brilliant acting on the part of William H. Macy, Joan Allen and Reese Witherspoon. Each actor imbues his or her character with a full-blown persona, effortlessly bringing us into the story. But Tobey Maguire presents the portrayal that stands out for me. His acting is nothing short of amazing. His characterization is totally convincing and seamless. We get to see the maturing of his character in such a believable way that the relatively short time span in which it happens is irrelevant. Ironically, when most actors go for the meaty, dialog-rich scenes, Maguire does his finest work in one standout scene after another where he hardly speaks at all. Such consummate craftsmanship in a young actor is truly noteworthy.

Much has been made of the fact that teen sexuality is brought into the innocent world of *Pleasantville* by a modern teenage woman and it leads to color beginning to occur in that monochrome world. To infer that color only occurs when the moral purity of *Pleasantville* is sullied is to miss the mark of what writer/director Ross is trying to convey. His use of color merely indicates change and growth. We mustn't forget either that the world in which this occurs is not a true representation of the Fifties but a sitcom simulacrum of the Fifties, replete with twin beds only, bathrooms without toilets, and a cloyingly bland, simplistic outlook on life. In one sense, what happens in *Pleasantville* really did happen in the Fifties, for people behave as people wherever and *whenever* they are.

If Gary Ross errs, it is, in my opinion, that he offers change as though it can take place in a vacuum without any really negative spin. He shows only the positive side of change without considering the downside. In my humble opinion, what differentiates the Fifties from our time is the fact that societal change took place within a strong moral framework. And it was that framework that allowed change to gradually occur without throwing the baby out with the bath water. What many fail to realize as well, was that the culture of the Fifties essentially carried over into the Sixties up until 1965, when society's youth slipped the constraints of morality and embraced the mores of the "hippie generation."

Despite its inevitable weaknesses, *Pleasantville* is an entertaining and enjoyable film. It has wit, and charm, and points out some valuable lessons in human interaction. Gary Ross gives us a modern fable, couched in the fantasy world of classic Fifties TV. While some may want to castigate Ross for his counter-cultural approach to the Fifties in *Pleasantville*, they should keep in mind that producers of that day weren't interested in presenting reality, they were interested in filling seats in front of TV sets. Ross exploits that masterfully, never beating the drum too stridently—or too long.

If there is a "message" in *Pleasantville's* story line, I would have to say it is that sometimes we have to stop fixating on what's *supposed* to happen in life and just accept many things as they *are*. Perhaps, when we do this, we will then see that sometimes the things we fear can actually open our eyes to new possibilities for us—possibilities we were unaware of until change rocked our narrow worldview. Like any good fable, *Pleasantville* delivers its lessons in a deceptively simple and eminently entertaining package.