

ARTS

"Tin Men," a touching tale of tit-for-tat and transition

TIN MEN

Written and directed by Barry Levinson.
Starring Richard Dreyfuss, Danny DeVito, and Barbara Hershey.
At the Cheri, the Janus, and Somerville (Assembly Square) theaters.

By PETER DUNN

CAN ANYTHING GO WRONG? Danny DeVito received critical acclaim last year as a deceitful husband in "Ruthless People." Richard Dreyfuss won acclaim for his performance as coat hanger magnate in "Down and Out in Beverly Hills." Barbara Hershey was striking as the object of Michael Caine's desire in Woody Allen's multi-Oscar winner, "Hannah and Her Sisters." All the principals in Barry Levinson's new film, "Tin Men," are on a roll. Not much can go wrong.

Richard Dreyfuss and Danny DeVito are the tin men of the title — aluminum siding salesmen, the common of Baltimore of 1963 — Bill "BB" Babowsky and Ernest Tilley respectively. "Tin Men" is a soft-spoken and subtle comedy of their confrontation, evolution, and transition.

The film opens on extreme closeups of a beautiful, shiny, new car as the credits flash past in classy art deco lettering. Then, as the audience begins to recognize images of car parts repeating themselves, we realize that we are subjectively ogling a brand new Cadillac Coupe de Ville along with BB. A large Caddy with its distinctive lines and snazzy fins is the ultimate status symbol for tin men and BB knows he deserves one.

For Tilley, the day begins as any other — nagging from his pestering wife, Nora (Barbara Hershey), and a stiff neck that just won't loosen up. As he drives to work in his big yellow Caddy, all seems natural.

However, a collision course is about to change his life in some subtle and some not so subtle ways.

BB's shiny new Cadillac makes it a sixth of a mile out of the car dealership onto the street only to be sidetracked by Tilley. Instant mutual hatred and oaths of revenge. And so begins a joint escalation of car mutilation and one-upmanship that draws innocent Nora into the fray.

But although "Tin Men" could easily degenerate into gut-wrenching comedy by playing for laughs as BB and Tilley go at each other, writer and director Barry Levinson instead opts for the type of comedy that draws that little chuckle from inside. This is the kind of comedy that leaves a warm glow inside the viewer as he leaves the theater, a knowledge that the human condition is a humorously uplifting one.

Levinson's "Tin Men," like his earlier "Diner," concerns itself less with plot and more with telling the tale of male bonding. Where "Diner" focused on the young friends who gathered at the diner to talk of women and exploits, "Tin Men" focuses on the aluminum siding common and their trials, tribulations, and scams, using BB's and Tilley's feud as the thin thread that links everything together. So instead of a linear storyline depicting the mutual one-upmanship of the two rivals, "Tin Men" is not averse to wandering off on some tangent in the everyday life of a tin man.

Woody Allen's films come first to mind when viewing "Tin Men." The comedy and style are quite similar. But Levinson's "Diner" and "Tin Men" are to Allen films as Gene Kelly is to Fred Astaire. While Allen films are more often geared at the sophisticated intelligencia, Levinson's comedies touch a chord in the heart of the working class man.



Richard Dreyfuss, Barbara Hershey, and Danny DeVito in "Tin Men."

The final theme of "Tin Men" is one of transition. On the one hand the tin men's rivalry connotes an unswerving denial of surrender but on the other hand, they are forced to make changes in their lives. How the two deal with and adapt to the changing rules of life is just as important in "Tin Men" as their refusal to cede to one another.

This gradual transition is most noticeably exemplified with Levinson's masterful use of color to suggest mood. Where the disillusionment and moodiness of "Diner"

were shown through dark and grayish colors, "Tin Men" starts with bright blues and yellows and slowly drifts to darker shades as the film progresses.

Also, Levinson's preoccupation with faces — often filming a conversation in loose closeups and tight medium shots — adds a certain subtle intensity to what his characters say. The fact that his characters stutter, repeat themselves, and fail to find the proper words, as opposed to the mostly well articulated and well argued language of an Allen film, adds a middle-class believability to the script.

Dreyfuss and DeVito are perfectly cast as the two tin men. For once DeVito seems more to fit in as just another of the many common instead of being an short, frustrated oddball. And Dreyfuss is comfortable and convincing as a graying but still seductive bachelor. But the gem of "Tin Men" is Barbara Hershey: after seeing her in "Hannah" where the film begins appropriately enough with the sentence "God, she's beautiful. . .," the transformation to simple, bespectacled, Maryland accented housewife is incredible. Perhaps its an early prediction of an Oscar nomination.

Levinson's "Tin Men" is a comedy to be sure, but no Monty Python or "Police Academy V" here. Levinson has blended charm with simple laughs at the expense of the everyday man to show us that we can chuckle at ourselves and don't need buffoonery to entertain us. But more than simple, lingering, warm laughs, Levinson has combined his comedy with a believable tale of everyday life to give an uplifting story of human perseverance.

"Working," a musical written by an assembly line

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the Livelong Day" and "I Hear America Singing," in a tone reminiscent of people singing the US national anthem.

Moving along into the vignette sequences, individual performances saved the show from disaster. The portrayal of the paperboy by Athena P. Tai '90, happily one of the first vignettes, woke the audience up with her energetic "Neat to be a Newsboy." She marched around the stage like a toy soldier throwing newspapers through every window she could. This song illustrated the work-is-fun theme.

Michael Friedhoff '90 deftly portrayed a Mexican migrant worker who told a sad, eloquent story about how hard his mother's life had been, how she had never given up hoping for something better for her family. While he talked, Jennifer Sokolowski '90 softly sang "Un Mejor Dia Vendra." If "Working" had consisted of only pieces such as this, it would have better conveyed Terkel's intent.

Robert Young's gas meter reader, sneaking up behind the housewife (Carol Smith '89) and screaming "Gas man!" was a good laugh. Rina Cerulli '86 gave a sparkling performance as the boisterous Italian waitress, Delores Dante. Delores saw waitressing as an art form — how she placed a plate, how she never expected a tip for her performance. As Cerulli belted out her song, she ignored her whining customers.

Creating trucks riding through the night was cleverly accomplished by attaching two flashlights on the sides of a box. Riding atop his box, trucker Richard Buellesbach '90, in a rich, torchy voice, sang "Brother Trucker."

We necessarily plodded through work-as-drudgery themes with Deb Kreuze '90 as an editor and Smith as a housewife. Although the housewife complained in her song that housewifing is underrated and quite fulfilling, Smith's uninspired, defensive tone did not convince. Or maybe it was the backup singers pushing imaginary

vacuum cleaners.

The choreography and set were uninspired. Sarah Abrams chose one dance step which the actors employed repetitively throughout the production. It was a backup singer-type movement, where the feet awkwardly cross over one another, but it was difficult for the actors to synchronize the step with the music. The set was a badly painted wall simulating cinderblock (illustrating the work-as-a-jail-cell theme).

Friedhoff returned at the show's close as a steelworker who hoped he would have some accomplishment to present to his son, even if it was a steel girder on top of a building. His song, "Fathers and Sons," was lovely. He was then joined by the company in "Something to Point to," a song about taking pride in your work, which they sang with resounding energy. Unfortunately "Working" will not be a show MTG can point to. The fine singing and acting talents of the Guild could have been better employed.

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