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## ***Palindromes*: Backwards and Forwards with Todd Solondz**

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"If you are the depressed type now, that is the way you are always going to be." This is Todd Solondz' alter ego speaking in his new film *Palindromes*, his recent "fairytale" about an adolescent girl going through many hard changes in life—including pregnancy, forced abortion and a Huckleberry Finn escape down a river—all in a search for unconditional love. The first word in this film is "Mom" and the last word "Mom": a mirror of palindromes that shows that nothing ever changes. The story is simple: a girl wants the ideal love of a mother, and to find it she decides to be a mother herself, and yet, from beginning to end, she is unsatisfied in her quest. Her forced abortion—and consequent hysterectomy—is simply a metaphor for the inability to evolve, and indeed the final scene is a flashback of shots back to the opening frame.

Todd Solondz made his film a palindrome—at every level—because as he puts it: "we are paradoxically always changing—we grow and we change—and at the same time, it is also true that we are not changing. Certain things yes you can improve, however there are certain things that we cannot, and we are better off if we can accept the limitations of who we in fact are." This lack of change, failure of difference, is not just unilateral, restricted to our own individual evolution. Aviva, the adolescent girl (her name, need I say, is a palindrome?) is played by eight different characters, each sharing with the other the basic essence of adolescent vulnerability, although in every other way different: fat, thin, black, white, male, female red-haired, dark-haired, little, huge. The point of this Bunuelian trick is that this character is, in essence, universal, and that just as all eight characters are vaguely the same, so are we: inherently unloved yet hopeful, a universal flaw that we should accept.

A theological argument? "Of course these questions of a theological nature are built into the story," responds Solondz. "But it comes from the story, rather than from me trying to pose any agenda." Asked how he cast his actors—and why eight Avivas—Solondz responded: "For the Avivas, I was looking for a quality of vulnerability, of innocence, that certain young people can project, to provide something of the glue that connects them, from one to the other, so that even as they change sex and race and so forth throughout the course of the film, there would be a certain kind of consistency that would make Aviva in fact one character."

That "one character" is the tortured adolescent that Solondz knows well, from his first work, *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996) to his more recent *Storytelling* (2001), all of which feature the loser in a lonely aggressive hell, replete with New Jersey strip-malls and over-anxious moms. One wonders what happened in Solondz' own New Jersey suburban past to have this issue of the unloved, suicidal, pedophilia-prone adolescent



*Palindromes*

[Director's IMDB Page](#)

so raw, the fodder of such forcefully critical masterpieces of film such as *Happiness* (1998). One also wonders how he perceives his native USA. Solondz' films are as much an examination of the adolescent as of his home country's consumer culture and its native patriotism. Flags waving in every scene, America comes off as a cruel market of wannabee Beautiful People and self-satisfied religious fanatics, where the only retort is a sort of violence—be it through guns or storytelling.

Solondz, grey and balding, with a tendency to keep one hand in a pocket, and his head lowered, is open to such questioning. He grins widely from behind his big green-framed glasses, and, while continuing to look askance, shifting his gaze down and to the left when approached by questioners, he is more than ready to proffer glib responses—before his publicist slips him away, —responses which one feels are rather like his films themselves, made tongue-and-cheek.

The biggest question in this film, as in other Solondz films, is the choice to shock the audience with scenes of what most critics would agree is “bad taste.” After Aviva's mother forces her 12 year old to have an abortion, Aviva runs away to seek for new mother-love, and finds it in the blissful fairytale home of “Mamma Sunshine”, a born-again Christian who bakes “Jesus-Tear” cookies, and has assorted with her all the kinds of children who, in a *perfect*-obsessed world, might have been aborted: the blind, the crippled, the epileptic, the dumb. (To quote Aviva's own mother: a deformed child isn't a baby, “it's a tumor.”) Aviva is welcomed into this ideal gingerbread home, this parody of do-gooders where sun-flowers bloom on emerald-green grass, and where the frames are so over-crowded with colors and cloths that even the spectator feels the claustrophobia of cloying maternal warmth.

Here the jokes get cruel, much like Mamma Sunshine's own iron that is kept upright in one frame with its heated point facing us. “Last year our special daughter ran away,” quips Mamma S in her sweetie-pie voice. “And she didn't even have any legs.” Other risqué humor includes the blind girl being complimented for her masterful job at “watching the flame.” One of the most campy shots, hard to watch, is all these disabled children—including Barbara, a botched abortion—singing with microphones, in an imitation of the Jackson Five.

“What cruelty?” says Todd Solondz. “I love these characters. The blind, the crippled.” He turns the question on the audience: if *they* perceive something wrong with filming an obese black girl (one of the Avivas, and the most powerfully played), that shows something wrong with *them*. “Why shouldn't these people be actors in the movie? I glory in having a big black woman, but if she is mocked because of this, or if the children with disabilities are mocked, that is not where my head is. Why shouldn't the disabled sing?”

Solondz' responses belie the fact that it is hard to take a psycho-realistic approach—i.e. “love the characters”—to a film that is so post-modernly self-conscious, where the characters are decidedly non-real, except as hilarious figments, and where in that loving home the director waxes about, irony is the dominant trope, not sentiment or compassion. Each scene is set up as a stage, its props as fake as could be, resulting in tableaux of macabre jokes. There is, for example, a shot of Aviva and a bag of garbage both leaning in the same way against a trailer, to highlight their similarity as rejects. In another, a sexually violated doll is found in a dumpster full of aborted fetuses. As for the misfits—including one named Skippy after the peanut butter—these are spoofs of people, hardly real characters that we can “love” by any stretch of the imagination. Indeed, some of these characters are so crudely drawn, they seem an adolescent's cruel sketch of his enemies in the

lunch-room. So can Solondz be serious when he says: “The family Aviva comes to is a sort of paradise. There is a poignancy when you first see these kids at the breakfast table.”

This is the very same breakfast table where Mr. Sunshine asks: “Can you pass the freedom toasts?”

Solondz may be purposefully careful in his responses, so as to let the controversial film speak for itself. He prefers, he says, to stand in the sidelines: “curious to see how this movie plays in Ohio”---if it ever, of course, gets that far into the heartland. The film, he speculates, could be taken for a pro-life film after all, the climax is the mother’s dreadful decision to force her daughter to abort) while it could also of course be taken as pro-choice film (the Sunshines, avid pro-lifers, are behind a murder movement to kill abortionists, which results in a bloody spree of dead children). He wants to leave it open.

If pressed, however, Solondz will admit that he is deliberately playing with a whole host of American sacred cows, on all fronts, from the abortion debate to commercialism (Aviva’s mom aborted one son so as to be able to afford “N’Synch” tickets) and even—beyond *touché*—the twin towers.

“The twin towers,” Solondz quips. “That’s the least of it. My movie requires a certain open-mindedness. If you go in with a certain liberal agenda, or a certain conservative one, you are going to look at it in a very limited way.” He contends that what he is mostly getting at is the American—and the universal—tendency to narrow-minded binary thinking. “I want to explore through narrative techniques something of who we are in this polarized world. The US is just a microcosm of what is happening globally, when you have the secular and the fundamentalist division.”

Solondz is cagey about the meaning of his own film: it’s not the “world” that he is critiquing (although clearly he is aware that is the only safe rhetoric he can use), it is the US. The “secular”/“fundamentalist” division of which Solondz speaks is arguably a US phenomenon, not a global one: reflective of the American tendency to divide, as sociologist Mahmood Mamdani’s argues in *Good Muslims/Bad Muslims* (2004), all people into good secularists and bad believers. The “secular” and “fundamentalist” division, according to Mamdani and other scholars of religion, is a purely American invention, which—as the last election showed—has lately rebounded against the US itself. Solondz’ caricatured view of religious people, lumping all Christians together as do-gooder fanatics, dangerous with guns—plays unwittingly into this binary thinking, a move that could contribute the widening Republican-Democrat chasm already established in the last election.

And yet, this is exactly why I doubt this film will play for long in the States, let alone in Ohio. It’s too provocative. Solondz’ portrayal of two sides who don’t understand each other, who are equally hypocritical, and whose concern for their cause leads to more misunderstanding and violence, reflects dramatically and sharply the current climate in the US. Indeed, what makes Solondz’ film sharply rewarding—despite its own binarisms, despite its cruel jokes--is the fact that it dares to tell the story we all know—the vulnerability of adolescents, the obstinacy of limited world views, the unnurturing environment of strip mall commercialism—through a prism of uncompromising pain. . . . The movie—as enfant provocateur—works

It is a movie that deserves attention. Storytelling is Solondz’ forte, and here he has outdone himself, offering an unprecedented pastiche of innovative narrative techniques. We have references to *Night of the Hunter* and *Huckleberry Finn* in the fake river scene, where a plastic boat sails down a pink river, a painted backdrop to Aviva’s journey. We have “mad tea

party" references in the Sunshine home and delightful *Alice in Wonderland* transformations as Aviva goes from small to big, and down again. There is even a counter-text to Dorothy's "there is no place like home" in Aviva's lullaby of escape: "Take me please, help me get faraway, to a place, any place, faraway." Each "chapter" of the 8 sectioned piece begins with a "new" Aviva, always different and always the same (except for the portrait that hangs in the over-pink bedroom), which makes the film fresh no matter how many stories it references, how dark the theme: a testimony to the power of palindromes.

Our director is wrong to say we don't move forward. He has. This film, "dedicated to Dawn Weiner", the suicidal adolescent protagonist of his first movie, is by far his most coherent work, the one that presses most shockingly at the memory of being adolescent—and at the pain of being human, imperfect, and yet wanting, like the director himself, to have it both ways, stressing imperfection at the same time that he, the artist, makes it rhyme.