

John G. Young Selected Film Reviews:



“bwoy” The Bottom Line: A taut, provocative drama.

Writer-director John G. Young’s fourth microbudgeted feature, taking its title from Jamaican patois for “boy,” uses the seemingly simplest of setups, an online hookup, to explore a rich complex of identity, sex, race and class. Centered on absorbing performances by Anthony Rapp and Jimmy Brooks as intimate strangers, *bwoy* plays out in large part on smartphone and computer screens. But circumstances that might have been static in less skilled hands are given tantalizing life by Young, the actors and the deft camerawork of cinematographer Ryan Balas. The drama, which opens theatrically in Los Angeles after festival and special series screenings, is a discerning, provocative dissection of personal connections in the so-called connected age.

As Schenectady, N.Y., suburbanite Brad, Rapp (an original castmember of *Rent*, and of the upcoming series *Star Trek: Discovery*) is all coiled misery and repression. Returning home from his soul-crushing call-center job, he barely acknowledges the presence of his wary but patient wife, Marcia (De’Adre Aziza), and certainly allows no space for them to help each other grieve for the son who died in a backyard accident. Having shut out his African-American spouse, the only person Brad wants to reach out to is someone he’s never met in person.

In a quick matter of days, he and Yenny (Brooks), a handsome 23-year-old Jamaican, have escalated their flirtation from dating-site messages to texts to video chats and online sex — apparently Brad’s first sexual experience with another man. They speak tenderly to each other as well as talking dirty. Soon Brad is sending Yenny money to help him settle small bills, but not without questioning whether he’s being played by the playfully earnest young man.

The audience will wonder the same thing. Young’s story poses another complex question, and one that grows more urgent as Brad grows obsessed with Yenny: Can a not-quite-real relationship, and one in which we know at least one party is lying, be a source of personal truth and self-realization?

Locked away from Marcia in a room with his computer, Brad begins his lies with his dating profile — shaving a few years off his age, implying experience by changing “sensitive male” (no takers) to “daddy top” (many). But then, looking the open-faced Yenny in the eye, the blushing awkward office drone transforms himself into a hotshot New Yorker who works in “finance.” In a sense he’s been lying for much of his 42 years. As the taut drama unfolds, Young (*Rivers Wash Over Me*, *The Reception*) asks whether a new set of lies is necessary to set Brad free.

Running through Brad and Yenny’s charged interactions, along with loneliness and grief, is the troubling matter of paternalism. With blinders on to everything but the dark-skinned virtual lover who calls him Daddy, Brad pushes away the painful, guilt-ridden memories of the dark-skinned child who was his son.

It’s deeply tangled stuff, expressed with a powerful simplicity that turns the dual-screen connection into a world, hyperfocused and deceptively whole.

FILM COMMENT By [Amy Taubin](#)

Control and emotional intensity are perfectly balanced in John G. Young's *bwoy*, a minimalist indie in which action is largely mediated by phones and screens. The film is receiving a theatrical release, but it's far more disturbing and queasily erotic to watch on your "personal" computer.

As in Young's haunting debut feature, *Parallel Sons* (1995), and his elegant social satire *The Reception* (2005), drama develops in the intersection of race and gay sexuality. Brad (Anthony Rapp) is a buttoned-up, closeted middle-aged man, living in bleak Schenectady with his African-American wife (De'Adre Aziza). The two can barely speak to each other, and we discover from small early clues that Brad blames himself for the accidental death of their son. A former doctor, he now works in the phone bank of a credit card debt collection agency. At night, posing as a wealthy New York City businessman, he becomes embroiled in obsessive online sex with Yenny (Jimmy Brooks), a young Jamaican man with an irresistible smile and a body, if not to die for, then sufficiently alluring to engender the longing for a fantasized tropical paradise where "Daddy Brad" can fuck his "Jamaican Pussy Bwoy" in the flesh.

Young's measured direction and editing and Rapp's performance are extraordinary for showing how easily repression and guilt can create a dissociated fugue state where virtual and actual become indistinguishable.

Chicago Tribune

Web Behrens, Special to the Chicago Tribune

"bwoy." This bleak drama unfolds at the pace of a slow drip, eventually filling its bathtub until all its emotionally paralyzed characters run the risk of drowning. The plot grows out of a thorny dynamic familiar to so many: searching for love online. "bwoy" succeeds thanks to the reserved central performance by Anthony Rapp. Rapp's career began early, as one of the kids in "Adventures in Babysitting," but he shot to fame as an original cast member in "Rent". The audience sees from the start that Brad, a lonely man in upstate New York, isn't entirely honest in his interactions — indeed, the depth of his lies becomes clear as time elapses — but we're left to wonder: What about the veracity of the guy on the other end of the wireless connection?



Rivers Wash Over Me By Ronnie Scheib

A gay, black, intellectual New York teen is sent to live with relatives in the hostile alien territory of the South in John G. Young's drama "Rivers Wash Over Me." Young's films ("Parallel Sons," "The Reception") depend on his thespians' ability to flesh out their characters and naturalize their idiosyncratic, often interracial relationships. Elizabeth Dennis virtually carries the film through sheer force of personality.

The film opens in Jefferson, Alabama., with the arrival of Sequan (Derek Middleton); self-effacing to the point of autism (though his radical T-shirts speak volumes), he alienates everyone he meets. His star athlete cousin Michael (Cameron Mitchell Mason), with whom he bunks, brutally rapes him as an expression of his own closeted homosexuality. Quoting James Baldwin in English class earns Sequan the disgust of his white English teacher and the enmity of fellow student and drug dealer Ahmed (Duane McLaughlin), who denies his own intelligence by refusing to go to college. Black and white school kids alike look on Sequan with contempt, united in their willingness to beat him up.

Sequan receives little support from his cousin Charles (co-scripter/co-producer Darien Sills-Evans), the recently installed town sheriff, who is struggling to maintain integrity within the highly compromised racial politics of the region. Although unstated, it is clear that having a gay resident in his upscale house would complicate his situation. Charles will live to profoundly regret his cowardice at the pic's close.

Only Ahmed's white girl friend, Lori (Dennis), a self-destructive, slutty-looking, coked-up rich girl with a mile-wide sweet streak, dares to befriend Sequan, who reminds her of her gay brother Jake (Aidan Schultz-Meyer). Soon the siblings are hanging with Sequan, showing him the town and teaching him to swim.

Ultimately, "Rivers" contains the elements of a fascinating film about the lies, denials, cover-ups and compromises underneath the fragile racial balance of a small Southern town.

Virtually any scene with Dennis explodes spectacularly. She effortlessly synthesizes her character's contradictory aspects, energizes the film's flow and conveys the tensions in the town with personal immediacy.

Other Reviews for “Rivers”

“One of the 10 best films of the year!”

- Bay Area Reporter

“Topping our list is *Rivers Wash Over Me*, a short but tense film about a sensitive gay teen transplanted from his native New York City to the deep South that addresses racial conflicts, class tension and homophobia with devastating results.”

- Chicago Time Out

“Rivers Wash Over me may not be the easiest film to sit through but it’s a Damn Important one...”

- New York Cool

“Rivers Wash Over Me Unflinchingly tackles the topics of race, homosexuality, death, class and sexual abuse.”

-Atlanta Journal Constitution

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“One of the best unreleased films of 2009.”

-Amy Taubin, Indie Wire

Reviews for “The Reception”

The New York Times

Four Souls Disguised as Couples:

The Reception Movie Review by Dana Stephens

Jeannette (Pamela Holden Stewart), an independently wealthy Frenchwoman, and Martin (Wayne Lamont Sims), an African-American painter, live together in splendid isolation in an idyllic clapboard house in upstate New York. They spend their nights snuggled together on the sofa, reading and sipping red wine. Theirs is a life any couple would envy - except that Jeannette and Martin aren't, strictly speaking, a couple. She's straight, he's gay, and their longtime platonic cohabitation is a volatile mix of convenience, codependency and genuine affection.

One wintry day, Jeannette's estranged daughter, Sierra (Margaret Burkwit), shows up with her new husband, Andrew (Darien Sills-Evans), in tow. She's looking to reconnect with her mother and, not incidentally, to collect on a long-promised inheritance.

Soon the two couples' stories are unraveling into a tangle of intersecting revelations: Jeannette is an alcoholic whose nightly bouts of drinking end in recriminations and self-pity. Martin is a blocked artist who allows his live-in companion to berate and humiliate him in exchange for her financial support. Sierra may or may not be faking her marriage to Andrew to get her money. And worst of all, Andrew is the kind of arrogant, self-righteous snob who refuses to drink his hosts' down-market brand of coffee.

"The Reception," the second film by the acclaimed independent director John G. Young, was shot on digital video in eight days on a budget of \$5,000. It's an intimate chamber piece, dialogue-heavy and at times claustrophobic, but the four central characters are so deftly sketched, and their shifting alliances so intricately choreographed, that the film never feels talky or staged. The actors are consistently excellent, especially Ms. Holden Stewart as the charismatic yet monstrous Jeannette.

As Martin and Andrew begin to explore their feelings toward each other in what might be thought of as the film's final act, there are some scenes that ring false and at least one overly pat resolution. But with its direct and nuanced treatment of the complexities of racial prejudice, sexual orientation and addiction, "The Reception" is a quietly ambitious and memorable film.



The Reception

By Ronnie Scheib

John G. Young's sophomore outing "The Reception" (after 1998's "Parallel Sons"), an imposing no-budget four-hander, unfolds with authority and grace. An odd couple, an alcoholic French woman and a gay black American painter sharing affection and pain in a country house in upper state New York, are visited by her estranged daughter with new black hubby in tow. While the dialogue-heavy, two-couples-in-a-single-location, "Virginia Woolf"-ish setup inevitably implies filmed theater, "Reception" cinematically embraces its artificial isolation. Superb emotional thesping complements script's measured restraint, but in the absence of name players Strand's skedded limited summer release will rely on critical support.

When relatively sober, Jeannette (Pamela Holden Stewart) exudes knowing charm and wry self-awareness that are extremely attractive. Terrified of being alone, she clings to Martin (Wayne Lamont Sims), whose compassion seems infinite. Indeed, he can be counted on to forgive her for her frequent inebriated attacks of virulent truth-telling.

Martin, in turn, suffers secretly from painter's block. He rationalizes that his creative paralysis is due to his need to be there for Jeannette. Their locked-in co-dependency is shattered by the arrival of Jeannette's long-alienated daughter Sierra (Margaret Burkwit) and her supposed new husband Andrew (Darien Sills-Evans).

Young doesn't deal in big dramatic revelations, his characters' evasions, lies and half-truths amounting to little more than the small change of emotional dysfunction. Giving his actors plenty of breathing room, he allows them to develop organically, never rushing them into confrontations or tell-all self-explanations. Confidently cooking gourmet meals or contemplatively chopping wood, they possess an inner self-sufficiency that plays well onscreen.

Sim's Martin is particularly affecting, his face radiating sympathy and tenderness with just enough self-hatred to give his personality a slightly problematic edge. Stewart's Jeannette is so convincingly Gallic in inflection, in gesture, and in what she takes for granted that her ultra-Anglo name comes as something of a shock.

Nuanced line readings, comfortable silences and concisely referenced backstories further take the pressure off the need for heavy signifying. Amazingly free of the bitterness that often informs such claustrophobic gabfests, pic finally and decisively espouses intimacy over confrontation, any excess touchy-feely sentimentality channeled into unexpected sexual pairings.

At a time when Hollywood's attempts to slickly mainstream "adult" relationship films about artists and artsy intellectuals ("Door in the Floor" "We Don't Live Here Anymore," "Closer") are hamstrung by a dour, almost unconscious Puritanism, Young's small-scale, effortlessly cosmopolitan grasp of marginal lifestyles and alternative sexuality is comforting by dint of its occasional clumsiness.

Los Angeles Times

John G. Young's "The Reception" is a gratifyingly subtle and sophisticated chamber drama set on a 300-acre snow-covered estate in upstate New York. Bitter divorcée Jeanette (Pamela Holden Stewart), a beautiful but alcoholic Frenchwoman of perhaps 40, has retreated from the world in her elegant and spacious Victorian, which she has shared for the past six years with the devoted Martin (Wayne Lamont Sims), a gay African American painter who has fled the New York dating scene.

Disrupting their world, Jeanette's estranged daughter Sierra (Margaret Burkwit) arrives unannounced to introduce her new husband, Andrew (Darien Sills-Evans), and claim her inheritance, which she is to receive upon her marriage. Sierra's French grandmother, still very much alive, has bypassed her daughter, because of her drinking, in favor of her granddaughter. Jeanette insists the newlyweds stay for her birthday party the next evening and several more days so that she can hold a proper wedding reception. Jeanette and Sierra get on better than either might have imagined, but as the title suggests, events take a dramatic turn at the party.-- *Kevin Thomas*
LOS ANGELES TIMES

Foursquare: Lively Drama Spiked With Risky Questions

The Reception By Mark Holcomb

Like the incendiary domestic melodrama of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* framed in a Pinter-esque narrative mindfuck and spiked with piercing questions of race, class, and gender, John G. Young's *The Reception* is a fresh and uncompromising account of emotional self-immolation and romantic flux. And it has a happy ending to boot.

Essentially a tale of two couples (give or take a gormless suitor and mock spouse or two), *The Reception* focuses on Martin (Wayne Lamont Sims), a nonproducing, psychically numb, gay African American painter who's sequestered himself in the upstate New York farmhouse of well-off white dipso depressive Jeannette (Pamela Holden Stewart). He absorbs her drunken abuse in exchange for the companionship and remote digs, and successfully ignores his own unhappiness until Jeannette's estranged daughter, Sierra (Margaret Burkwit), and her new, also black husband, Andrew (the phenomenally versatile Darien Sills-Evan), turn up unexpectedly. Like Martin and Jeannette's relationship—to all appearances a comfortable marriage with no more than the average potential for ugly collapse—Sierra and Andrew's entanglement is not quite what it seems, and the foursome's hidden longings and simmering resentments spew to the surface posthaste.

Young's previous effort, *Parallel Sons*, is already a decade old, and it's tempting to believe he spent the intervening years crafting the jarringly complex (but never cheaply illogical) story twists that make this follow-up so lively and demanding. But what really sets *The Reception* apart—in addition to Derek Wieseahn's admirably innovative DV compositions—are the risky social themes and bracing tenderness that underlie its plot formalities.



The Reception: Review



★★★

John G. Young's claustrophobic second feature deals with many of the same thorny issues — race, class, sex and the insidious power of stereotypes — that drove his remarkably assured debut, *PARALLEL SONS* (1996). Set in upstate New York in the middle of a snowy winter, it's a chamber piece anchored by embittered, alcoholic, middle-aged Frenchwoman Jeanette (Pamela Holden Stewart), who owns an elegantly restored farmhouse that she shares with Martin (Wayne Lamont Sims), a gay and substantially younger African-American painter. Martin and Jeanette are less than lovers but more than friends; their bond most closely resembles an intense parent-child relationship in which the roles of caretaker and dependent are amorphous and shifting. Still beautiful and vibrant, Jeanette is being diffidently courted by neighbor Chuck (Chris Burmeister), who abandoned a high-pressure career in law to raise llamas, but she backs away from anything more than flirtatious friendship. Martin, an obvious outsider in their near-rural community by virtue of being both gay and black, is limited (or perhaps restricts himself) to furtive encounters with local men. An unexpected visit from Jeanette's estranged daughter, Sierra (Margaret Burkwith), shatters the fragile equilibrium of their day-to-day existence. Sierra arrives with her new husband, Andrew (Darien Sills-Evans, of TV's *Cosby* and *Third Watch*), the Ivy League-educated scion of a conservative and prosperous African-American family, and intends to stay only long enough to discuss an inheritance her late grandmother promised her. But Jeanette insists they stay a few days so she can throw a wedding party. Liquor and lust unleash a torrent of frank talk that unmasks the lies and delusions on which all four have built their lives. This slightly stagy four-hander's handsome production values belie its \$5000 shooting budget and eight-day schedule, but what really distinguishes it is the exceptional cast, which seems all the more exceptional considering that Burkwith and Sims are making their debuts and Stewart's credits are limited to a handful of small supporting parts (including several for Hal Hartley). Their subtle, complex performances could put far more experienced and better-known actors to shame.

-Maitland McDonagh

TIME OUT New York

In the snowy midwinter, an alcoholic Frenchwoman (Stewart), who shares an isolated farmhouse in upstate New York with a gay African-American painter (Burmeister), receives an unexpected visit from her estranged daughter (Margaret Burkwith) and new son-in-law (Darien Sills-Evans). Liquor and lust are the catalysts that unleash a torrent of frank talk about race, sex, class and hopelessly damaged family relationships, unmasking the lies and delusions on which all four have built their lives. Writer-director John G. Young's claustrophobic drama is a slightly stagy four-hander distinguished by fine performances and handsome production values that belie its \$5,000 budget and eight-day shooting schedule.

BY: MM

The Dallas Morning News

The Reception

Movie Review

By MARIO TARRADELL / The Dallas Morning News

In John G. Young's starkly powerful drama *The Reception*, snow takes on almost as much importance as the film's four characters.

Set in the gorgeous yet isolated countryside of upstate New York, the pristine white powder blankets the earth. But it also insulates the emotions of the main characters to the point of near suffocation. These are lives in need of a liberating heat wave.

Jeannette (Pamela Holden Stewart), an aging French woman whose failed marriage left her bitter and lonely, lives with Martin (Wayne Lamont Sims), a gay black painter burned by life and love who is resigned to a tranquil if stifling existence. They function as a married couple, minus the intimacy. Their mundane routine is jolted by the arrival of Sierra (Margaret Burkwit), Jeannette's estranged daughter, and her new husband, Andrew (Darien Sills-Evans), a reticent black law student.

The Reception, written and directed by Mr. Young, should serve as a textbook example of less being more for big-budget Hollywood. Shot in eight days for \$5,000, the film stands as a riveting achievement in storytelling. The characters are all finely drawn, boasting just enough detail to satisfy while still leaving an element of intrigue. The plot unfolds deftly and brilliantly, communicating every racial, sexual, emotional and personal nuance at work in the dynamic relationship between four flawed and fascinating people. And the cinematography, grainy and white on the outside, richly hued on the inside, enhances the script.

There's also a quartet of multidimensional performances. Ms. Stewart embodies the refined yet erratic mess that is Jeannette. Ms. Burkwit gives Sierra a conscience, even when she probably shouldn't have one. Mr. Sims plays Martin with restrained vulnerability, while Mr. Sills-Evans shades Andrew with a contradictory combination of selfishness and neediness. One particular scene between Martin and Andrew, as they sit in front of a fireplace, marvelously encapsulates the emotional core of the film.

But fear not, *The Reception* is never maudlin. Instead, it displays the frailties of its protagonists through carefully choreographed scenes that gradually envelop the viewer. By the film's end, the snow finally begins to melt.

Reviews for Parallel Sons:



★★★★

Seemingly out of nowhere comes this thoughtful and remarkably mature first film by director John G. Young. Twenty-year-old Seth Carlson (Gabriel Mann) is a white B-boy wanna-be whose blonde dreadlocks, hip-hop style and love of gangsta rap and Malcolm X set him apart from the other residents of his white-bread, upstate New York town. Seth is also gay, and wants nothing more than to shake the stifling conformity of his small town, move to New York City and study art. His life takes a unforeseen detour the night he comes face to face with Knowledge (Laurence Mason), a real-life African-American who's just escaped from a nearby correctional facility. Intrigued, Seth hides the injured Knowledge in a cabin deep in the woods and nurses him back to health. Knowledge is suspicious of Seth's kindness and racial identification, but his initial antagonism gives way to respect and a growing love as the two men discover the ways in which they are surprisingly alike. One reason Young's film feel so fresh is that it's a character-driven drama filled with honest-to-God characters, each carefully drawn and extremely well acted. It's also what makes the film work as well as it does: Given the loaded race-sexuality subject matter, it could easily be strident. But Young lets character development subtly subvert stereotypes -- Knowledge doesn't fit Seth's idea of "black" any more than Seth fits any ready-made gay stereotype. What Seth and Knowledge may be becomes refreshingly secondary to who they really are. [leave a comment](#) --Ken Fox

Entertainment Weekly

PARALLEL SONS Gabriel Mann, Laurence Mason (Strand, 93 mins., unrated) Deep Meaning Alert: This movie, released theatrically in 1996, features a character named Knowledge (Mason), and the rest of the film threatens to be just as heavy-handed: Seth (Mann), a young, white, artistic loner from a rural small town, has steeped himself in African-American pop culture. (Yes, this signifies alienation.) Then Knowledge arrives -- a black convict, wounded in his escape. The two bond over TV trivia, fall in love, and make a break for Canada, veering dangerously close to Metaphorical Overkill. Fortunately, however, writer-director John G. Young presents his endearing characters with lifelike flaws, and shoots them with care and skill. Mann and Mason bring a compelling naturalness, which does more to make this tale meaningful than any overblown allegorical name ever could. B+

Emanuel Levy – Variety Film Reviews

Parallel Sons

Sundance Film Festival 1996 (Dramatic Competition)—Set in a sleepy upstate New York town, where cross burning is a weekend pastime, “Parallel Sons” follows the chance meeting and tragic fate of an aspiring white artist and an African American correctional facility escapee.

Seth (Gabriel Mick) is a lonely, closeted, artistically minded youth in a sleepy, prejudiced rural town that has an overpowering obsession with African American culture. When he runs up against Knowledge (Lawrence Mason), an escaped black convict, who is wounded, Seth hides him in the family cabin and attempts to befriend him, only to discover that he's gay too.

Despite the brutal circumstances of their introduction, their lives become irreversibly entangled when Seth hides Knowledge in the woods, safe from the racist sheriff and nurses him back to health.

But Seth's act of kindness goes beyond compassion, for Seth's personal world is fueled by the romanticized notion of the meaning of being a young black man from the inner city. Set can lip-synch to rap without missing a beat, and he wears gangsta clothes and his hair in dreads, albeit blonde.

Knowledge becomes more than an opportunity to escape as the two men tentatively discover a deeper commonality pulling them closer together. When a sudden accident drives them further away from the law, they embark on a desperate journey in search of freedom.

Young's tragic buddy tale stresses the notion of artistic obsession that crashes against the cruel social reality. There may be too many obvious confrontations and message-driven scenes about social marginalization, both self imposed and imposed by others, but the acting of both men is good.

Taut with dramatic and sexual tension, “Parallel Sons” is the first feature of writer-director John G. Young, who shows promise as a skillful filmmaker.

Ultimately, “Parallel Sons” is more about kindness and compassion than it is about interracial communication and the differences that make one man “white” and the other “black.”

“Parallel Sons” won the audience award at both the Florida Film Festival and the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Festival.