

Los Angeles Times

Friday, November 24, 2006

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REVIEW

A 'Dream' world of hustling, parties

Two losers con their way to the top — except their top is a cruel, selfish place. And L.A. looks pretty bad too.

By MICHAEL ORDOÑA
Special to The Times

Because it's made by a successful entrepreneur, one might expect a film called "Living the Dream" to be a cheery self-help guide — at least in the sense of helping yourself to as much booty as possible. Well, cheery it's not. In fact, it's downright misanthropic. There is ample booty (of all kinds) and gorging at the trough, but this is a bitter, occasionally farcical drama with the most hostile cinematic view of Los Angeles since "Crash."

Christian Schoyen's movie, co-directed with Allan Fiterman, follows two friends who were outcasts as kids in Eugene, Ore., and are down-in-the-mouth losers as adults in Los Angeles. Jonathan (played by Schoyen) and Brenda (Sean Young) cook up a scheme to start an executive headhunting agency without contacts, experience or capital. They spring off insurance fraud and land in a



Rover Films

APPEARANCE OF SUCCESS: Sean Young, left, and Christian Schoyen star as friends in "Living the Dream."

high-rise office with lazy, hateful employees and no idea how to run a business. But since the appearance of success is more important than actual success, these outsiders are suddenly insiders, throwing money around town and making it with hotties. As Lindsey Buckingham once sang, that's how we do it in L.A.

Actually, the lyrics most befit-

ting the movie would be from Trent Reznor's "Closer": "I have no soul to sell." This is the protracted (spiritual) death of a fake salesman whose only product, himself, should be recalled. Jonathan goes from a hangdog wimp whose meekness is a slapable offense to a coldhearted con man who would rather party up than get down to business. He

doesn't even like dogs. It's difficult to pull for someone so ready to return the bullying he has received — it's "Welcome to the Dollhouse" meets "Glengarry Glen Ross" but without the snappy dialogue.

Brenda is the film's emotional center: a 43-year-old, unattached, lonely woman, painfully aware of life passing her by. Young's performance is nuanced, but again it's hard to cheer on someone so enthusiastically amoral and materialistic.

That's the viewer's dilemma: It's like a footrace between Donald Trump and Leona Helmsley — who do you root against less? The film's tone is also problematic. It's unclear whether it's trying for absurdity or quiet drama, or both, or neither. Some performances are cartoonishly large, while the music and some situations are deadly serious.

There is undeniable heart in "Living the Dream," with its implicit criticism of mercenary values, but its world is populated solely by hustlers, recruiters and salesmen with nothing to sell.

MPAA rating: Unrated. **Running time:** 1 hour, 24 minutes. **Exclusively at Laemmle's** Sunset 5, 8000 Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, (323) 848-3500.