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Movie Review | 'True Adolescents'

Great Outdoors Beckons as a Test of Manhood

By [STEPHEN HOLDEN](#)

Craig Johnson's tender indie comedy, "[True Adolescents](#)," examines the interim passages of male lives when time is nervously frittered away and the future looms through the mist like a giant scary question mark.

Whether you're 34, like Sam Bryant ([Mark Duplass](#)), an aspiring Seattle rock musician whose career is going nowhere, or 14, like his cousin Oliver (Bret Loehr) and Oliver's timid best friend, Jake (Carr Thompson), some of the vacuum is filled with defensive banter. Much of it revolves around the kind of casual homophobic baiting that boys of all ages aimlessly lob back and forth like a softball in a sullen game of catch.

"[True Adolescents](#)" is a first cousin of Lynn Shelton's 2009 film, "[Humpday](#)," which also starred Mr. Duplass, playing in that film one of two old friends who on a dare announce at a party that they will film themselves having sex as an "art project" for an amateur porn festival. Because both are straight and much less adventurous than they pretend to be, they find following through on their declaration a terrifying prospect that can't be laughed off.

Both films share the same Seattle quasi-bohemian milieu. Both explore the sexual discomfort and embarrassment of boys and men not entirely secure in their masculinity. It is the same territory dominated by the Judd Apatow school of comedic bromance, minus the Hollywood trappings of stories that reassuringly snap into place while transforming anxiety into yucks.

Sam's tailspin begins when he is thrown out of his girlfriend's apartment and has no recourse but to crash in the suburban home of his divorced aunt Sharon ([Melissa Leo](#), wonderful as usual). When she pressures him to take her son, Oliver, and Jake on a camping trip after her ex-husband has reneged, Sam, who has little outdoor experience, agrees. The outing was filmed on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington and in the forests of the Cascades, and the scenery is spectacular.

Both boys are of an age when they can still be scared by horror stories told around a campfire, and when Sam spins out a doozy about a family massacred on the same beach, Jake's eyes widen with fright. Mr. Loehr and Mr. Thompson are perfectly cast as adolescents who have one foot still firmly lodged in childhood. In an early scene they are shown shyly making out with girls their own age around a swimming pool and comparing notes. Once in the wild, they share a tent on a driftwood beach.

The movie's turning point, which happens so fast you almost don't see it, arrives in the middle of the night when Sam dons a [Halloween](#) mask to frighten the boys in their tent and catches them in an experimental kiss. Oliver furiously turns on Jake, who runs away. The next morning Jake is still missing. Sam and Oliver embark on a grueling search through the surrounding forest during which they get lost.

Time and again, "[True Adolescents](#)" resists the temptation to succumb to easy melodrama. The search, for all its real hazards, isn't exploited for suspense or terror, as Sam and Oliver blunder awkwardly through the woods until they run out of light and collapse on the ground.

The film's most overtly comic moments involve a hippie couple that they encounter. The couple are so stoned they can hardly talk. When they finally speak, they bandy clichés about “spaceship earth.” These easy caricatures briefly throw the movie out of whack.

“True Adolescents,” like most indie movies related to the mumblecore school, is a delicate piece of machinery. Its truth lies in the tiniest details: the pauses, the stricken looks, the false bravado, the pathetically redundant slang (so many “dudes”). If its tone occasionally wobbles, “True Adolescents” feels accurate enough to make you squirm with recognition. By the end these three “boys” have grown up just enough to peer a little further into the murk in which the question mark still hangs.

TRUE ADOLESCENTS

Opens on Friday in Brooklyn.

Written and directed by Craig Johnson; director of photography, Kat Westergaard; edited by Jennifer Lee; music by Peter Golub; production design and costumes by Meg Zeder; produced by Thomas Woodrow; released by Flatiron Film Company. At the reRun Gastropub Theater, 147 Front Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn. Running time: 1 hour 28 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: [Mark Duplass](#) (Sam Bryant), Bret Loehr (Oliver Mitchell), Carr Thompson (Jake), Linas Phillips (Slater), Davie-Blue (Jericha), Laura Kai Chen (Amy) and [Melissa Leo](#) (Sharon Mitchell).