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MOVIE REVIEW

'Coffee Date'

The wry romantic comedy of sexual confusion deftly becomes serious without losing its sense of humor.

By Kevin Thomas, Special to The Times

Stewart Wade's "Coffee Date" is a wry romantic comedy of sexual confusion that deftly becomes increasingly serious without losing its sense of humor. Amid a recent flurry of low-budget independent productions, "Coffee Date" is a standout with its strongly developed central characters, complex themes and polished look.

Good-looking 35-year-old Todd (Jonathan Bray), who has a cushy office job and a spacious flat in a vintage Spanish duplex, has just been divorced. He allows his deadbeat brother Barry (Jonathan Silverman) to set him up on a blind date via the Internet. The uptight and square Todd is surprised and uncomfortable when he realizes that the meeting place, a coffee shop, has a virtually exclusively gay clientele. While waiting for his date to show up he warily strikes up a conversation with a buff young gay man (Wilson Cruz).

Todd eventually realizes that Barry has played a prank on him — that the gay man is Kelly, the date he has been waiting for. By then the two men have discovered they share a passion for movies, and Todd invites Kelly to take in a Bergman double feature at the New Beverly Cinema. Todd now sees a chance to oust his brother Barry, incidentally a decided homophobe, by taking Kelly home and taking Kelly by the hand to his bedroom. (Kelly promptly climbs out a window and goes home.) Not only does this send Barry instantly packing but also inspires him to call his mother (Sally Kirkland), who promptly gets on a plane to lend support to Todd, who she says she always knew was gay.

Loving but overbearing and obtuse, the mother is one of those people who are so absolutely confident of their convictions that they never bother to listen to anyone about anything. Todd's life soon becomes a nightmare, with friends, neighbors, co-workers — even his boss (Leigh Taylor-Young) — smothering him with acceptance and absolutely refusing to give any credence whatsoever to his assertions that he is in fact straight. At the same time his friendship with Kelly, the one person who understands his plight, flourishes.

As Todd's predicament intensifies, he becomes less confident about his sexual orientation. Could it be that mother knows best after all? Or could it be that Todd is discovering that a straight man can be good friends with a gay man? The latter, which after all happens in real life, is rarely explored on the screen.

Wherever and however Todd and Kelly end up they face challenges: It will be hard for Kelly's attraction to Todd not to turn into love. If they end up in a friendship rather than a relationship, Todd will forever face assumptions from others that he's gay when he is with Kelly. In the process, Wade challenges with humor, compassion and a sense of absurdity the tyranny of stereotypes, gay or straight, and knee-jerk political correctness.

Writer-director Wade develops considerable substance in his comedy that allows both Bray and Cruz to reveal much emotional conflict and confusion within Todd and Kelly, who in turn create portrayals rich in nuance and depth. "Coffee Date" also affords Kirkland one of her best roles in a long time □ you can't help but respect the mother's steadfast love, but you'd also like to strangle her.

The film also shows to advantage Jason Stuart as Todd's campy, nosy office mate who ultimately has the opportunity to display the inner strength and resilience that gay men develop simply to survive. That Kelly might also be attracted to the obnoxious Barry proves a bit of a stretch, but "Coffee Date" is so wise and accomplished that it easily sustains this glitch.