

REVOLUTIONARY ROAD ____ (8.5/10)

The quintessential "trapped in the 1950s" story

Novel by Richard Yates

Screenplay by Justin Haythe

Directed by Sam Mendes

Leonardo DiCaprio ... Frank Wheeler

Kate Winslet ... April Wheeler

Michael Shannon ... John Givings

Kathy Bates ... Mrs. Helen Givings

David Harbour ... Shep Campbell

Kathryn Hahn ... Milly Campbell

Frank Wheeler: I want to feel things. Really feel them.

April Wheeler: Don't you see? That's the whole idea! You'll be able to do what you should have been allowed to do seven years ago, you'll have the time. For the first time in your life, you'll have the time to find out what it is you actually want to do. And when you figure it out, you'll have the time and the freedom, to start doing.

Frank Wheeler: This doesn't seem very realistic.

April Wheeler: No, Frank. This is what's unrealistic. It's unrealistic for a man with a fine mind to go on working year after year at a job he can't stand. Coming home to a place he can't stand, to a wife who's equally unable to stand the same things. And you know what the worst part of it is? Our whole existence here is based on this great premise that we're special. That we're superior to the whole thing. But we're not. We're just like everyone else! We bought into the same, ridiculous delusion. That we have to resign from life and settle down the moment we have children. And we've been punishing each other for it.

John Givings: Hopeless emptiness. Now you've said it. Plenty of people are onto the emptiness, but it takes real guts to see the hopelessness.

A fascinating mixture of American Beauty, Far From Heaven, and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

Sam Mendes directed American Beauty, and you can definitely see his imprint with the use of the score and scenes that accentuate the sense of movement toward a dreaded inevitability. Naturally, as a conscientious "no spoiler" reviewer, I can't tell you the destination, but if you read the quotes above you can grasp virtually everything you need to know.

It certainly gives nothing away to tell you Frank Wheeler (Leonardo DiCaprio) and April Wheeler (Kate Winslet) meet cute as highly charged young adults in the big city. It's love at first sight, and the director and actors do a fine job of making Frank and April the perfect couple... not only to fall in love, but to have a chance to break out of the conforming straight jacket(s) of the era. Game on. And most of us are cheered with hope for them: she's an aspiring actress and he utters the lines above, i.e. "I want to feel things, really feel them."

From the gitgo, you have a feeling they're different, that they may actually conquer the ubiquitous conformity of their Man in the Gray Flannel Suit times. They get married. Turns out April's acting ability won't even get her raves in community theater, which

greatly saddens her (and me). And Frank has more or less settled into the same company his father worked for... though in an office setting rather than being a "shop rat" employee. The symbol of their early accomplishment in the relationship—not to mention the two small children—is a quaint little house on a corner rise of Revolutionary Road.

To dream the dream

Talk about symbolism. Talk about a breeding ground for conflict. The tragic irony is "if only Frank and April would 'be realistic'" and acquiesce to the middle class woobie Stepford Wives (and husbands) lifestyle they could be happy as clams... or at least as content as their small-expectation neighbors, Shep (David Harbour) and Milly Campbell (Kathryn Hahn). I mean, who said life was supposed to be full of creativity and joy? Get with the program, dudes.

As an aside, many real couples—and certainly the individual persons within many couples—from time immemorial have had deep longings for freedom from the seemingly drab, routine, collective existence they've inherited. Yours truly, for sure. Just think back: the period of courtship, followed by the first few years of marriage: "Wow. We can do anything and go anywhere. And all our dreams will come true." Certainly, most of us look at our mates as embodying those key virtues that lead to mutual psychological fulfillment or at least extraordinary financial success. Then children come, someone gets sick, an in-law moves in, hubby has to move or gets laid off—or gets thrown in jail for smoking a joint—and so on. The accumulation of burdens often breaks that proud dam of resolve to make something special out of one's life.

Well, in Revolutionary Road, the perennial conflict between personal growth and abject conformity is drawn in high, humanizing relief. [You know, it just now occurs to me that Leonardo and Kate, via Titanic, were the ultimate poster children for the high hopes of romantic love.] The symbol of determination (or the will to escape) is first revealed to us the day after a heated argument between them: she suggests—drawing on a memory of his 'I want to feel things' statement—that they emigrate to France, where he spent some time in the service.

He's reluctant, but she's convincing. Then for a while they ride the wave of that dream: "We can make it work, Frank. We have enough savings; we'll sell the house, I'll get a job translating for the embassy, then you can take some part time stuff, until you find what really excites you. The kids are young and think of how much they'll learn, how wide open their options in life will seem." [The main of April's logic comes from the quote at the top of this review.]

Another aside: Listening to April make this long thematic appeal to Frank about striking out and doing what you want, not what others want for you, I'm struck by the pre-feminist context. They are still in the mid- or early-1950s, and the Women's Liberation Movement is only a glimmer on the surface of Betty Friedan's coffee.[1] April's argument is all based on the primary happiness and fulfillment of her hero-husband, and in service of his accomplishments she is only too glad to play accompaniment. Kate Winslet plays this scene with immense subtlety, not a trace of tongue-in-cheek post-liberation disdain for the sisters.

So what, then?

Well, let's just say hubby isn't exactly the hero April kinda sorta neurotically laid on his shoulders. Further, wifey isn't exactly forthcoming about some key intimate facts of her own. This Trip to Paris idea becomes less and less realistic, indeed this particular escape leitmotif becoming a cause of rancor and discord. Are they going to be trapped like all the others; is there no way out? And, "What in the hell is the matter with you? If it weren't for you—you conniving bitch or you weak, pathetic pretend-man—I could have made it to the other side." [This is the Virginia Woolf analog.]

The book by Richard Yates was written in 1961, so I've read from other reviews. And I have to give the screenwriter, Justin Haythe, as well as director Mendes, multiple snaps for concept loyalty. Further, the fullness with which they set forth the environment is noteworthy; it humanizes the main characters by setting them in a meaningful context.

One of my favorite sequences of scenes comes from the family of the woman, Mrs. Helen Givings (Kathy Bates), who sold the Wheelers the symbolic house. Her son, John (Michael Shannon) has been committed to an insane asylum, which, back in the day, amounted to a license for the asylum commandants to play Dr. Frankenstein. He's had 30-something shock treatments, but the young man still walks upright. The social stigma in those days of being "nuts," or having a child who is disturbed was awful. When Helen—dead-nuts, right-on performance by Bates—timidly asks April if the Wheelers will have her and her husband and son over for a visit, she expects to be rejected.

But on such matters of genuine compassion and sensitivity, the Wheelers shine: "We're different, so it's okay for others to be different, as well." Helen is overjoyed that April will have them. Then John, who is certainly a troubled and strident presence, during the visit, offers his frank assessment of his own condition... and the condition of the Wheelers and the condition of mankind in general. After the three of them—John, Frank, and April—take a walk in the woods, the Wheelers, with a smile, concede that of all the people they know the crazy guy is the only one who 'gets' them.

Kate Winslet was also up for an Oscar for her role in this film—she won for *The Reader*—and the movie and other actors and contributors got their share of awards' nods. Interestingly, Michael Shannon, who plays Psycho Guy was also nominated for an Oscar in a supporting role. All deserved. This movie may tend to make you pause and take a breath, examine your own life and significant relationships: did I get trapped, am I fulfilled, can I really look down my nose at the Wheelers or the others more conforming? As many of you know, I tend to turn most issues these days toward an exploration of consciousness along the Tolleian path. The following seems an apt quote:

"...As humans have become increasingly identified with ["mind"], most relationships are not rooted in Being and so turn into a source of pain and become dominated by problems and conflict." — page 130, *The Power of Now*

As far as problems or traps go, whether for the Wheelers in pointed fiction or for ourselves in more diffuse reality, there only seems to be a way out if one finds an inner spiritual key.

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[1] Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, which forever changed our consciousness of gender identity.

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