

mutual appreciation



an ANDREW BUJALSKI film

www.mutualappreciation.com

Accent Film Entertainment and Goodbye Cruel Releasing presents

Distributed throughout Australia and New Zealand by:

accent
FILM ENTERTAINMENT

117 Bridport Street, Albert Park, VIC 3206, Australia

T (03) 9690 9997 F (03) 9690 8850 E info@accentfilm.com W www.accentfilm.com

CAST

Justin Rice.....Alan
Rachel Clift.....Ellie
Andrew Bujalski.....Lawrence
Seung-Min Lee.....Sara
Kevin Micka.....Dennis
Bill Morrison.....Walter
Pamela Corkey.....Patricia
Mary Varn.....Rebecca
Tamara Luzecky.....Esther
Ralph Tyler.....Jerry
Kate Dollenmayer.....Hildy
Keith Gessen.....Julian
Peter Pentz.....Scotty
Salvatore Botti.....Ron

FILMMAKERS

Writer, Director, EditorAndrew Bujalski
Producers.....Ethan Vogt, Morgan Faust, Dia Sokol
Director of Photography.....Matthias Grunsky
Co-Producer.....Mynette Louie
Associate Producer.....Jeff Caldwell
Sound Recordist.....Randall Good
Sound Mix.....Eric Masunaga
Grips.....Matt Boese, Sara Johnson Loveaux, Ken ReCorr
Post-Production Sound Supervisors..... Eugene Cho, John Koczera

Featuring songs by
Justin Rice & Kevin Micka, Bishop Allen, Omzo, Matty & Mossy, The Common
Cold, and Brandon Patton

and half a monologue by Lauren Mechling

TECHNICAL

Running Time.....109 minutes
Film.....16mm black and white
Sound.....SR

Director's bio

Andrew Bujalski's first feature film, *Funny Ha Ha*, was released theatrically by Goodbye Cruel Releasing. It finished a 20-city theatrical run grossing \$80K and is available from Wellspring on DVD. The film made ten critics' Top 10 lists, including AO Scott, *New York Times*; Amy Taubin and Michael Koresky, *Film Comment*; Gerald Peary, *Boston Phoenix*; and Warren Curry, *cinemaspeak.com*. Critic Ray Carney wrote of it, "The shaggy, baggy randomness of young adult life and love has never been captured more truly and convincingly on film. Never." At the 2004 Independent Spirit Awards, Bujalski won the "Someone to Watch" award. The *Boston Globe* describes him as "unerringly polite and somewhat disheveled." He types 89 wpm.

***Mutual Appreciation* brief synopsis**

Alan (Justin Rice), a musician whose band has just broken up, shows up in New York to pursue his burgeoning rock and roll career. He starts by searching for a drummer for a show he's already lined up, and otherwise goes about the mechanics of self-promotion. He finds a champion in Sara (Seung-Min Lee), a radio DJ who sets her sights on a submissive but uninterested Alan—and finds him a drummer. In his down time, Alan drinks and strategizes with his old friend Lawrence (Bujalski), a grad student, and Lawrence's girlfriend Ellie (Rachel Clift), a journalist. Alan endeavors to keep his shoulder to the wheel, while Ellie finds herself compelled by him. The attraction is mutual, but both parties are reluctant to take a next step.

A note on the production

Mutual Appreciation continues in the same methodological vein that director Andrew Bujalski and much of the same crew developed on their previous film, *Funny Ha Ha*—characters and stories inspired and acted by Andrew's friends, minimal equipment and crew, an insightful script with room for "happy accidents"—but the filmmakers have stumbled upon possibly a darker, funnier tone with *Mutual Appreciation*.

Fun facts

Justin Rice (Alan) sings and plays guitar in the band **Bishop Allen**. The other lead singer of Bishop Allen, Christian Rudder, played one of the leads in *Funny Ha Ha*. Their debut album *Charm School* received four stars from *Rolling Stone*, in addition to praise from *GQ*, *The Village Voice* and many others, NPR's "Weekend Edition" ran a feature story on the group in 2003. Bishop Allen is in the process of self-releasing one four-song EP for every month in 2006. The songs Justin plays in *Mutual Appreciation* are his own and Bishop Allen's.

Bill Morrison (Walter) makes his acting debut in *Mutual Appreciation*. He is an experimental filmmaker who has five films in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, including *Decasia*.

Many of *Mutual Appreciation*'s other cast members are filmmakers: in addition to director Andrew Bujalski, Bill Morrison, and Justin Rice (whose short documentary *Look Back, Don't Look Back* had a tremendous festival run beginning in 1999), other filmmakers in the cast include Pamela Corkey (*Easy Listening*), Kate Dollenmayer (experimental shorts including *The Whole Other Side to My Busyness*), Salvatore Botti (*Dreams of Her*), and Rachel Clift (doc short *Take It from Me*).

The producers, Ethan Vogt, Morgan Faust, and Dia Sokol, have worked in many different roles on many different projects. Ethan shot and co-edited the award-winning doc *On Common Ground* and produced *Funny Ha Ha*. Morgan and Dia both worked on Errol Morris' *First Person* series for IFC, and Dia recently worked as a producer on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

Festivals and Awards

South by Southwest, Woodstock, Thessaloniki, Rotterdam, Munich, Sydney, Chicago, Sonoma Valley, AFI, East Lansing, Atlanta, Sidewalk, Boston Independent, Virginia, Vancouver, Wisconsin, Newport, Portland, Woodshole, Jeonju, Nashville, Las Palmas, Munich, Arizona, Maryland, IF Istanbul, Titanic Budapest, IndieLisboa, Durban, New Zealand, Era New Horizons and Hawaii.

Best Screenplay - Newport, *Best Director* – Sidewalk, *Top 10 Film of the Year* – Cinematical, *Village Voice Best of 2005 Film Series*

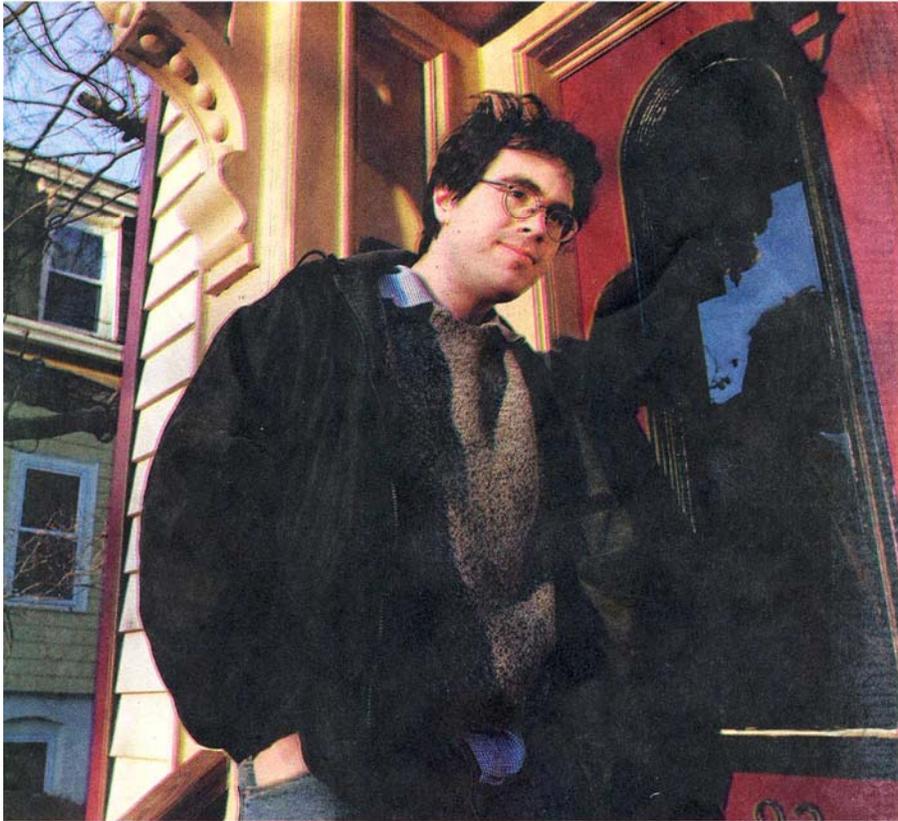
The New York Times

January 8, 2006

Arts & LEISURE

The (Mumbled) . . . Halting
. . . Voice — of a Generation

What's so funny about post-college malaise? The characters in Andrew Bujalski's films know. Kind of.



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

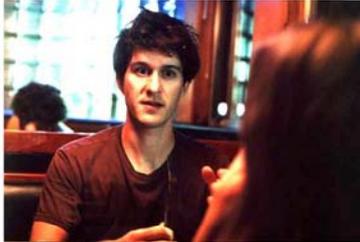
The New York Times

January 8, 2006

By DENNIS LIM

THE angsty youth, reflective and thinskinned, is one of American indie cinema's favorite archetypes, but the writer and director Andrew Bujalski manages to subvert it in one crucial respect. Instead of being motormouths, his characters speak in half-sentences that trail off into excruciating silences. Compared to Richard Linklater's earnest philosophers or Noah Baumbach's poised wiseacres, Mr. Bujalski's sheepish drifters are mortifyingly tongue-tied. But their verbal tics, taken together, could stand as a fumbling generation's poignant *cri de coeur*: "I guess," "I mean," "I'm sorry," "I don't know."

At 28, Mr. Bujalski has already made two homespun, micro-budget features, both set deep within the befuddling gray zone of post-collegiate life. In his first, "Funny Ha Ha," Marnie, a



Goodbye Cruel Releasing

23-year-old recent graduate, floats between dead-end temp jobs while nursing an unrequited crush and fending off an unwelcome suitor. His latest, "Mutual Appreciation," centers on a more ambitious but equally restless protagonist: Alan, an indie rocker who arrives in Brooklyn with a gig but no band mates.

Marnie and Alan are the most unassuming of existentialist heroes, slouching toward not epiphanies but the tiniest shifts in perspective. Both films are slow-burning comedies about the fear of adulthood made by someone who isn't yet inclined to sentimentalize or belittle these threshold years. As Mr. Bujalski presents it, the quarter-life crisis is an inherently funny condition, but it's not necessarily a laughing matter.

"Funny Ha Ha" was completed in 2002, but failed to secure distribution despite strong endorsements from critics and bloggers, not to mention a "Someone to Watch" prize at the 2004 Independent Spirit Awards. In April of last year, with the help of Houston King, a fan turned investor, Mr. Bujalski finally released his film

through a company called Goodbye Cruel Releasing.

Though still an industry outsider, Mr. Bujalski is emerging as a critics' favorite — A. O. Scott of The New York Times named "Funny Ha Ha" one of the 10 best films of 2005. The film was also a modest hipster phenomenon long before it opened, thanks to Sundance Channel showings and one-off screenings at colleges and art houses. On a recent Saturday evening, about 150 people, many of whom would not have looked out of place in Mr. Bujalski's movies, turned up at Anthology Film Archives in the East Village for the barely publicized local premiere of "Mutual Appreciation." (If no distributor comes forward, Mr. Bujalski and Mr. King say they will release the film themselves later this year; in the meantime, DVD's are for sale at www.mutualappreciation.com.)

The post-screening discussion at Anthology opened with a predictable question: How much of the film was improvised and how much scripted?

"I've gotten that at every Q & A," Mr. Bujalski said the following day. "I could have said, 'This is now a question I've answered a hundred times, so I have a scripted response, but I'm also making it up as I go along, so maybe this is a good analogy for how it works.'"

But the start-stop chatter in Mr. Bujalski's films is less arbitrary than it seems. A master of the mixed message and a veritable sculptor of dead air, he's deft at showing how inarticulateness can serve as defense tactic and passive-aggressive weapon.

Besides keen-eared writing, a key to his films' eccentric charm is his strange talent for casting nonprofessionals, often his friends. Kate Dollenmayer, the star of "Funny Ha Ha," and Justin Rice, the lead in "Mutual Appreciation," are both former roommates (with real-world accomplishments — Ms. Dollenmayer worked as an animator on Richard Linklater's "Waking Life" and Mr. Rice leads the indie-pop band Bishop Allen). Mr. Bujalski assigned himself the role of the spurned love interest in both films.

His preference for nonactors dates to his senior thesis film at Harvard; a change in shooting location abruptly forced him to write new scenes for new performers, and he found he had an easier rapport with the nonpros in his cast. The filmmaker Chantal Akerman, who was Mr. Bujalski's thesis adviser, recalled that once she suggested he cast a fellow student she had spotted outside her office. "I said, 'Run after her — she could be good,'" Ms. Akerman said in a recent telephone interview.

In today's independent film landscape, Mr. Bujalski is at once an anomaly and a stubborn

idealist. While digital video is the default medium for low-cost moviemaking, he insists on grainy 16 millimeter. "There's a deliberateness to film," he said. "If these films were on video they would feel a lot more frivolous. Film allows you to make the statement that this is on purpose." Mr. Bujalski also prefers the tactile splices of flatbed editing to cutting with a desktop computer.

Robb Moss, a documentarian and Harvard lecturer who lent Mr. Bujalski a Steenbeck editing machine for "Funny Ha Ha," said, "One of the charms of Andrew's films is that they spend no energy convincing you of his ambition."

Mr. Bujalski, who lives in Boston and still holds down a day job as a junior high school substitute teacher, cautioned against the temptation to romanticize his D.I.Y. process. "It's completely unsustainable," he said. "I've been absurdly lucky." (Both his films were financed through a combination of savings, grants, private investment and contributions from family and friends.)

He now finds himself grappling with the same career anxieties as his "Mutual Appreciation" hero, who goes through the motions of networking and self-promotion with an ambivalence that often shades into dread. Mr. Bujalski has acquired an agent and is looking to the economic models of independent stalwarts like John Cassavetes and John Sayles, who financed personal projects by taking on work for hire. Hoping for a shot at Hollywood screenwriting, he recently connected with some executives in Los Angeles, though he said he treated the meetings more like therapy sessions: "I would go in and tell them my problems," he said. "They always had a couch."

As the big 3-0 looms for this chronicler of 20-something malaise, his first two features increasingly represent not just an impractical way of working but also a quixotic way of life. "As I get older and my friends get older," Mr. Bujalski said, "it's harder to say to people, 'Take a month off from your life and work for me for free.'"

Early Praise for *Mutual Appreciation*

filmcomment

“I bet Andrew Bujalski is sick of reading that he’s the voice of his generation, when most of that neo-slacker demographic has never had the opportunity to see his films. Like *Funny Ha Ha*, *Mutual Appreciation* is hardly your standard Amerindie ... It’s shot on 16mm black-and-white, thus confirming Bujalski’s allegiance to a strain of maverick films—*Shadows*, *Stranger than Paradise*, *Clerks*—that bring poignantly accurate renditions of subcultures of which their directors have intimate knowledge to otherwise homogenized screens.—Amy Taubin

LAWEEKLY

“*Funny Ha Ha* director Andrew Bujalski’s latest is another baggy, ingratiating romp through post-collegiate anomie, awkward courtship rituals, and uncomfortable silences. As before, Bujalski’s preference for nonprofessional actors and his adept use of a roving, handheld camera lend the film a terrific, invigorating energy, as does his ear for the rhythms of conversation among bright young 20-somethings trying to establish footholds in a strange and forbidding grown-up world.”—Scott Foundas

Slate

“You might think of *Mutual Appreciation* as an emo cover of Godard’s *Masculine/Feminine*: a meditation on the crisscrossed subjectivities of boys and girls, their mutual comprehension or lack thereof. Bujalski makes intuitive portraits of his people from the inside out rather than fixing them into a conventional drama. If his improvisational flux seems slightly random—each scene finding its own idiosyncratic entry and exit points, its own stubborn, singular rhythm—a closer look reveals coherent symmetries at play. In *Mutual Appreciation*, watch how Bujalski comments on hetero befuddlement with a pair of gender-switch conceits. Early in the film, Lawrence is invited to participate in a theater event where men read aloud monologues written by women. Later, an extremely drunk Justin stumbles into a house party where three feisty girls proceed to dress him up in drag. The movie is full of such deft patterns.”—Nathan Lee

cinema scope
EXPANDING THE FRAME ON INTERNATIONAL CINEMA

“Bujalski is making what may prove to be the defining movies about a generation, which is to say my own, marked by its very lack of definition.”—Scott Foundas

VARIETY

“If John Cassavetes had directed a script by Eric Rohmer, the result might have looked and sounded like *Mutual Appreciation*. Indie auteur Andrew Bujalski (*Funny Ha Ha*) has studied his mentors closely—Mike Leigh and Jim Jarmusch are among his other obvious influences—and put whatever lessons he learned to good use in this unaffectedly naturalistic and appealingly quirky low-key comedy about twentysomethings in the process of inventing themselves.”
—Joe Leydon

The Boston Globe

“..shows the influence of Cassavetes and early Godard, but
it’s also very much of the moment.”—Ty Burr

THE PHOENIX

“The best narrative feature in the [Independent Film Festival of Boston] is Andrew Bujalski’s *Mutual Appreciation*. Here Bujalski fulfills the promise shown in his 2003 debut feature, *Funny Ha Ha*. He has moved from the womb of Boston to the testing grounds of New York City and has shifted format to black and white, undaunted by the inevitable comparisons that will be made with every other indie filmmaker who’s done the same, or by the irrelevant comparisons that will be made between his hero and that of every other indie film...Bujalski’s limpid style and the seeming improvisations have the spontaneity and wit of real life...but when studied reveal the calculation and symmetry of art.”—Peter Keough

“[A] droll, stonefaced, dead-on perceptive comedy of manners...
Nobody gets the zeitgeist as right as Bujalski and his delicious cast.”— Gerald Peary

More Kind Words for *Mutual Appreciation*

“Even though he’s only made two movies, Andrew Bujalski is, as I write this, one of my favorite American filmmakers... His movies exude the unique personality of an artist who is clearly doing it his own way, and the result is another beautifully personal and expressive film. ...Bujalski is making movies that perfectly capture the awkward voice of many members of his generation. It's time more people take notice.”—**Warren Curry, *Entertainment Insiders*** • “There’s a timeless quality to Bujalski’s talky-talky set pieces and black-and-white real-film cinematography. Star Justin Rice has a bit of a young Mick Jagger in him ...by way of, like, Rick Moranis..”—**Karina Longworth, *Cinematical*** • “One of Bujalski’s gifts is his ability to give every part, no matter how big or small, a sense of intelligence and life that extends beyond the frame and running time, and in this his work recalls the best of both Mike Leigh and Richard Linklater.”—**Jim Healy, *Chicago Reader*** • “All this loveliness reaches its inevitable apotheosis in *Mutual Appreciation*’s final scene. The exact nature of which I’ll decline to reveal, except that it slyly tweaks a warm reconciliation with residual sexual tension, awkward physicality, and underlying dishonesty, and the tight framing and deeply suggestive throwaway lines typical of Bujalski transform a happy ending into something much richer. It’s simply among the most searingly, intuitively “right” moments in all of cinema”—**Sky Hirschcron, *Stylus Magazine*** • “This film does not leave me. I do not know why. It simply comes back from time to time. It has this great camera-created film glue. Quality of a puppy dog or a child--film has 'look at me' quality.” **Dusan Makavejev** • “Director Andrew Bujalski and his amazing cast create such a unique and addicting experience that these 110 minutes go by in no time at all and the only thing you want when it’s all over is more... Authentic and hilarious.”—**Eric Campos, *Film Threat*** • “Andrew Bujalski is the Renoir of Gen Z (or whatever the heck letter we have devolved down to in this new and otherwise fairly unfunny century). *Funny Ha Ha* and *Mutual Appreciation* give us new eyes and ears. They let us hear emotional dog frequencies—and watch the butterfly flutters of feeling that bring us together and pull us apart. Bujalski makes us laugh at our foibles—and shed a tear of self-recognition at our fumbings of love.”—**Ray Carney, author of *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*** • “*Mutual Appreciation*...represents a significant achievement.”—**David Smedberg, *Cinema Veritas*** • “And Justin Rice, who plays the popster, fuses smarm, sincerity and self-interest so precisely you'll want to kick him off your couch.” **Jim Ridley, *Nashville Scene*** • “...with *Funny Ha Ha* and *Mutual Appreciation*, he has created two of the freshest, most original movies of the decade.”—**Fiona Morrow, *Terminal City Vancouver***

Press Highlights from Andrew Bujalski's Debut, *Funny Ha Ha*

"One of the Top 10 Films of the Year."

New York Times, Film Comment, Cinemaspeak, Boston Phoenix, Austin Chronicle, Art Forum, Portland Oregonian, City Pages, Eye

The New York Times

April 29, 2005

Postgraduate Depression, When True Love Is as Elusive as High Pay and Low Rent



Kate Dollenmayer, left, and Christian Rudder in "Funny Ha Ha."

By A. O. SCOTT

Marnie (Kate Dollenmayer) is 23, and she drifts through "Funny Ha Ha," Andrew Bujalski's low-budget first feature, in search of love and employment - with pretty disappointing results. The young men she is drawn to don't reciprocate, and she can't quite bring herself to respond to the one guy who seems to be genuinely smitten with her. After temping for a while, she finds a job doing research for a professor, which seems reasonably tolerable.

What gives this film its quiet pathos is not so much the relative bleakness of Marnie's circumstances but the modesty of her expectations. At one point, she makes a to-do list, and its lack of ambition - "spend more time outdoors," "make friends with Jackie," "learn to play chess" - is both funny and sad.

Marnie would never admit to anything more acute than mild depression, and Mr. Bujalski captures the ache of her existence without pity or melodrama. She is lonely, but far from alone, because

"Funny Ha Ha," much as it is the story of a few difficult, uneventful months in her life, is also a deft group portrait of recent college graduates - her friends, co-workers and would-be lovers - groping their way across the flatlands of early adulthood.

Their conversational ties sound at once stylized and improvised, and the movie's narrative rhythms are loose and ambling. It feels as artless and scattered as Marnie and her cohort, who wear old T-shirts with holes in them and decorate their apartments with nondescript furniture, some of it probably hauled in from the sidewalk. But this scruffiness is a bit deceptive, as "Funny Ha Ha" has both a subtle, delicate shape and a point.

Like John Cassavetes, whose influence is apparent here, Mr. Bujalski is an acute and intelligent dramatist who uses the appearance of chaos as a means of emotional exploration. I would bet that the ragged, swerving scenes in his film are much more tightly scripted and carefully rehearsed than they sometimes seem, which was almost always the case with Cassavetes. The main difference is that while Cassavetes's characters are often at the mercy of their feelings and pushed to the point of eruption, Mr. Bujalski's are cut off from theirs, and able to communicate only by painful, semi-ironic indirection.

If it were not so resolutely modest, and so rigorously confined in its minute observations of individual behavior, you might almost call "Funny Ha Ha," which was completed in 2002, a generational statement. But that would be false to both the film's aesthetic and to its insights. Mr. Bujalski's characters do not make statements; they barely make eye contact with one another, and they communicate in a hesitant, noncommittal idiom, prefacing every utterance with phrases

like "I don't know" and "I'm sorry." They spend their days working in grungy offices and their evenings drinking beer and eating hummus at impromptu parties.

The anomie of middle-class 20-somethings is hardly an unexplored subject in American movies, and "Funny Ha Ha" might at first glance be taken as yet another example of post-"Slacker" indie solipsism. But Mr. Bujalski's artistic self-confidence and the low-key idiosyncrasy of his cast resist such easy labeling.

This movie feels less like a careerist calling card than like a genuine effort to use film - and it is film, rather than the more modish digital video - to probe and reveal the curious facts and stubborn puzzles of contemporary life. It is a small, plain movie, shot in 16 millimeter in dull locations around Boston; but also, like its passive, quizzical heroine, it is unexpectedly seductive, and even, in its own stubborn, hesitant way, beautiful.

Funny Ha Ha

Opens today in New York and Boston.

Written, directed and edited by Andrew Bujalski; director of photography, Matthias Grunsky; music by Bishop Allen, the Crack Pipes, Dead Cat Bounce and Matty and Mossy; produced by Ethan Vogt; released by Goodbye Cruel Releasing. At the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 89 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Kate Dollenmayer (Marnie), Christian Rudder (Alex), Myles Paige (Dave), Jennifer L. Schaper (Rachel) and Andrew Bujalski (Mitchell)

SACKS & CO
NEW YORK, INC.

Los Angeles Times

June 3, 2005

“Funny Ha Ha,” This tender look at a woman’s entry into adulthood, is humorous and stealthily affecting



By CARINA CHOCANO

You wouldn't know it from watching Hollywood movies in which young people ace glamour jobs while inspiring articulate dreamboats to declare their love in public, but as David Rakoff once wrote, "Youth isn't wasted on the young. It is perpetrated on the young." Exactly how is brilliantly captured by Andrew Bujalski in his debut feature, "Funny Ha Ha," a deceptively simple portrait of a young woman trying to survive her dispiriting entry into adulthood. Twenty-three-year-old Marnie (Kate Dollenmayer) is a recent graduate living the post-collegiate life in Boston, where many of her friends have remained (presumably in the very same apartments that housed them through school) to slog through a series of entry-level jobs and baffling relationships. Shot on 16-millimeter film in a loose verite style, the film lopes and shrugs alongside Marnie as she pines for her weaselly, passive-aggressive friend Alex (Christian Rudder); looks for a new job after getting fired from her old one for asking for a raise; and reluctantly consents to a friendship with Mitchell (Bujalski), whose mad crush she doesn't reciprocate. Its naturalistic, low-budget style recalls Richard Linklater's "Slacker," but "Funny Ha Ha" is more interested in the mundane details of daily existence than in the fringe-dwelling exoticism of garrulous philosopher-geeks, eccentric conspiracy

buffs and motor-mouthed trivia addicts. Marnie has no career plans to speak of, nor is she trying to create an "alternative" life for herself. Mainly, she's staying afloat and trying to connect with others who are equally lost.

Early in the film, Marnie runs into her friends Rachel (Jennifer L. Schaper) and Dave (Myles Paige), a couple she admires mainly for their ability to sustain a relationship. They talk her into joining them for dinner with "Travis' girlfriend's engineering student friends," and she goes along for the ride -- archly noting that "it will be a spontaneous adventure, like my life." At the dinner, which turns out to be exactly as much fun as it sounds, Marnie learns that Alex has broken up with his girlfriend, Nina (Vanessa Bertozzi). She confesses that she's in love with him, then thinks better of it and adds, "Well, not in love...." Rachel helps her out, "You like Alex." That's more like it.

In creating the character Alex, Bujalski has nailed the mid-20s torture engine in all his vague, mind-messing, infuriating glory. A skinny, goofy kid whose charisma sets him apart from the dorks, spazzes and aloof, polo-wearing jocks who make up the bulk of Marnie's male acquaintances, Alex is friendly on the outside but capable of inflicting outrageous damage. He is incapable of sending a message that isn't mixed and is forever indulging in the unnerving habit of infusing every interaction with a jittery sarcasm that kills sincerity on contact. After his sister Susan (Lissa Patton Rudder) tells Alex that she encouraged Marnie to act on her feelings, he calls to discourage her in the vaguest, most open-ended way possible, ending the conversation at its most confusing with the promise to "talk more about it later." At a party a few days later, Marnie meets Wyatt (Marshall Lewy), the guy from the dinner, at a party, and fills a lull in an already awkward conversation with a tentative kiss. Wyatt goes along for a moment, then pulls away, saying, "I'm sorry, I don't know."

For those not versed in the poetics of inarticulateness, "I don't know" means "I

know but I don't want to say to your face," which along with "I mean" and "it's like," is one of the most useful tools in mid-conversation conversation avoidance. Despite being educated and intelligent, Marnie and her friends are strategically inarticulate when it comes to expressing their emotions or desires. Revelation makes one vulnerable, so they try as much as possible to limit their exchanges to these carefully conscribed phrases, which perfectly express the uncertainty, thwarted intentions and the inability to describe the resultant emotional state in three vague phrases that make up the dominant themes of their lives.

By simply re-creating what he has observed, Bujalski has created a tender, funny and stealthily affecting portrait of youthful powerlessness and frustration. Marnie is constantly trying to take control of her life, she just doesn't have the means to do it. In a quietly funny and tender scene, after running into Alex and Nina at the supermarket, she sits on the steps of the library compiling a "to do" list for herself that includes such goals as, "Fitness initiative!!," "Make friends with Jackie," "Spend more time outside," and "Go without drinking for one month." She makes desultory stabs in these general directions, with mixed results, but her big moment comes at the end, when she sees a chance and doesn't take it. It's a slight, almost imperceptible moment, and the movie ends abruptly right afterward, as if slamming a door. It takes a minute to realize you know all you need to know. She's going to be fine.

*

Funny Ha Ha
MPAA rating: Not rated; Times guidelines: Mild language
Goodbye Cruel Releasing presents.
Director Andrew Bujalski. Producer Ethan Vogt. Screenplay by Andrew Bujalski. Director of photography Matthias Grunsky. Editor Andrew Bujalski. Featuring music by the Crack Pipes, Dead Cat Bounce, Matty & Mossy. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes. Selected theaters.

April 29, 2005

THE GRADUATES

By Dennis Lim

Funny Ha Ha

Written and directed by Andrew Bujalski
Opens April 29, Cinema Village

Most of the ha-ha's in *Funny Ha Ha* are not exactly funny: Andrew Bujalski's debut feature is foremost a squirming comedy of recognition. This Boston ultra-indie--which Bujalski wrote, directed, edited, and co-starred in--slouches through the blurry limbo of post-collegiate existence, a period at once ephemeral and cruelly decisive. It opens with 23-year-old heroine Marnie (Kate Dollenmayer) stumbling into a tattoo parlor, where the proprietor refuses to ink her because she's plastered. This movie about the fear of the permanent--and the barely conscious, unwittingly reckless processes behind life-altering decisions--might be subtitled *The Possibly Indelible Adventures of a Desultory Twentysomething*.

Funny Ha Ha proceeds in slackerly fits and starts: Marnie drifts between numbing temp jobs and mulls over romantic prospects that are either undesirable or unobtainable. A long-harbored, not-so-secret crush on college pal Alex (Christian Rudder of the Brooklyn band Bishop Allen) flares up when he splits with his girlfriend. A flurry of brutally inept matchmaking within their circle of mutual acquaintances culminates in an excruciating phone call (later topped by a painful encounter at the neighborhood supermarket). Meanwhile, in a luckless role reversal, Marnie is pursued by Mitchell (Bujalski), a dorky co-

worker who makes his move with the conversation stopper "So, like, what's your deal?"

Shot on 16mm in an unassuming pseudo-verite, *Funny Ha Ha* is less offhand than it first appears. (The grainy, gangly naturalism and an early rave from critic and Cassavetes expert Ray Carney have prompted a string of somewhat misleading comparisons with the forefather of American independent film.) A movie full of goofy-cute people conducting profoundly casual and casually profound conversations littered with dangling sentences and pockets of dead air, it's seemingly designed to elicit a collective c'est moi from twentysomething hipster enclaves across the country. But Bujalski doesn't just reproduce the halting, roundabout patterns of actual talk--he has a keen ear for the defensive and passive-aggressive uses of inarticulate speech.

Alex's evasiveness has a lot to do with his selfish desire to preserve the status quo--he's in a position to enjoy his ambiguously flirtatious rapport with Marnie more than she is. Mitchell, perhaps strategically, alternates fumbling shyness with obnoxious bluntness. And Marnie, especially in dealing with Mitchell, conceals her more manipulative impulses behind a convenient air of eccentric distraction. Churning up mixed messages and conflicting intentions, Bujalski keeps the mood deftly poised between funny and sad. At her lowest, Marnie composes a to-do list, complete with little check boxes, which includes "learn to play chess?" and "fitness initiative!!" In the next scene, she's enlisted the gauche Mitchell to help out--though the leisurely afternoon of basketball and board games turns sour in

elaborately queasy ways.

Structured around nonevent and inaction, *Funny Ha Ha* recalls Jamie Thraves's 2000 British indie *The Low Down*, a neglected mini-masterpiece of quarter-life malaise. Bujalski's film likewise thrums with ambivalent dread--underlying the characters' inert indecision is a reluctance to let the rest of their lives begin, not least for fear that it might prove an undifferentiated haze. The final scene is as close to perfection as any Amerindie has come in recent memory--in a single reaction of Marnie's, we see a small but definite shift in perspective; abruptly, Bujalski stops the film, as if there's nothing more to say. It's a wonderful parting shot for a movie that locates the momentous in the mundane.

More Kind Words for *Funny Ha Ha*

“I’ve been hoping for two years that people who don’t write about movies or stalk them at film festivals would get to experience the wonderful vagaries of Andrew Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha*...[The film] is a smartly observed, unpretentious, and unconventional comedy of manners... Bujalski’s is one of the first movies to put such sensitive and true characters on screen in all their imperfections. He deserves a good, long career...to ignore him is to ignore the stammering voice of a generation.”—**Wesley Morris, *Boston Globe*** • “For those...who admire the films of John Cassavetes in theory but weary of them in execution, the trouble with his shaggy improv style is that of realism italicized, made overstated in its understatement. But time—or conversation, at least—may finally have caught up with him [in] Andrew Bujalski’s *Funny Ha Ha*...an ebullient sliver of a movie.”—**Owen Gleiberman, *Entertainment Weekly*** • “...Beautifully observant and wholly unpretentious with roots more in Cassavetes than Sundance style showbiz.” — **Robert Koehler, *Variety*** • “Perhaps because *Funny Ha Ha* does not come across as a stepping-stone film, a debut cheapie introducing a director on his way to “bigger, better” things: there is clearly a distinct, singular sensibility at work here, and one that is desperately needed as the line between indie and studio further dissolves, and more independent distributors are subsumed into the superstructure. In 1986, Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* felt unlike anything else predominantly because of the respect it showed for its own very specific milieu, its cultural significance a crucial byproduct of the value it placed upon its community. The respect granted to a generation...is something that cannot be faked, and Bujalski’s extraordinarily resigned document of twentysomething angst in a Boston suburb is remarkable for its sheer lack of angst.”—**Michael Koresky, *Reverse Shot*** • “*Funny Ha Ha* is really a joy... You see clichéd phrases like ‘a genuine original’ and ‘an unforgettable delight’ in movie ads every week. Much of the time, this lavish praise only cheats the few films that actually deserve it. For example, films like Andrew Bujalski’s charming comedy, which happens to be ... well, see above.”—**Elizabeth Weitzman, *New York Daily News*** • “With her hunched adolescent posture, her eager smile, and her halo of niceness, Dollenmayer is lovely, vulnerable, genuine...Women in the audience will slip easily into Marnie’s sneakers...Bujalski and Dollenmayer have a bright future.” —**Kyle Smith, *New York Post*** • “Once the film’s relaxed, confident rhythms start to take hold, its DIY plainness becomes an asset, syncing with dialogue so realistic that the camera seems plopped into a room without anyone noticing. Through an apparent mix of scripting and improvisational technique, Bujalski and his non-professional cast insert the ‘kind ofs,’ ‘likes,’ and ‘you knows’ that are part of casual conversation, but never make it into movie scripts. With this wonderfully de-stylized slacker-speak, Bujalski observes the awkward way people talk around the things most important to them, walling themselves up in apologies, non sequiturs, and a fumbling sort of passive-aggressiveness...In *Funny Ha Ha*, the commonplace somehow seems invigoratingly original.” —**Scott Tobias, *The Onion*** • “...A terrific movie. It raises so many little questions and offers so many quiet insights that one sitting isn’t enough...Marnie, the 23-year-old central character—a slacker’s slacker stuck in a quarter-life crisis, is one of the best-rendered characters I’ve seen in an American movie since *Sideways*.”—**Colin Covert, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*** • “*Funny Ha Ha* is not just a beautifully made film, it’s also a brave one. Writer/director Andrew Bujalski and his cast and crew have succeeded in creating what most established filmmakers in this country claim to do all the time but hardly ever pull off—they’ve made a film that dares to show life as it is really lived.”—**Matthew Ross, *indieWIRE*** •