

The fictional Mainers you'll meet in the can't-miss drama 'Nice People'

The film succeeds at authentically capturing the state and its people through five interconnected stories.

In covering the Maine film scene for the last decade or so, I've learned a few things. One is that a low-budget, no-stars local production generally needs a hook. Without being able to attract or afford recognizable faces, a Maine filmmaker is often best served by heading into a marketable genre, like horror, or by hanging their film on an easy-to-sell premise. Dramas are harder. Diffuse dramas that deal in ambiguity and the deadpan comedy of human behavior are hardest of all.

"Nice People," a 90-minute comedy-drama from Maine-based writer-directors Ian Carlsen and Jeff Griecci is a tough sell, but I'm going to try anyway. The Maine-shot feature is having its Maine premiere at Portland's Space on Thursday and Friday, and it's not a film any Maine film fan should pass over in favor of something easier to munch down like so



Dennis Perkins
Indie Film

many Raisinets. (Not that Raisinets aren't great, you just can't live on them.)

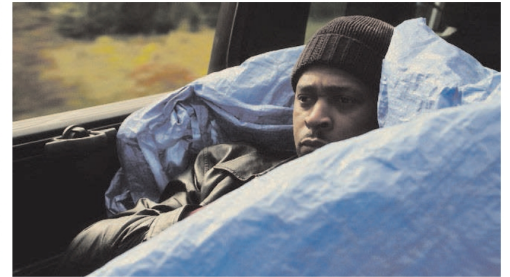
As profiled in this column back in June when the film was heading out on the festival circuit, "Nice People" presents five interconnected stories of Mainers each coping with the everyday perils of simply being human. Speaking to the filmmakers at the time, I was struck by Carlsen's evaluation of Mainers' uniqueness of character: "There's a quality Mainers possess where they feel the need to do something morally right and justified, but they don't have the full perspective on what other people are bringing to the conversation," opined the filmmaker, adding that that tension "can lead to comedy, and in some cases tragedy."

"Nice People" proves that, and that Griecci and Carlsen, both longtime Maine film scene fixtures, understand their fellow Mainers with an intimacy and affection more evocative than any local film I've ever seen. The film is actually five short films, each introduced with the names of the major players. "Val & Teddy" is about a formerly married couple (Brent Askari and Shannon Campbell), whose



Aidan Smart and Brent Askari in "Nice People."

Photos courtesy of Mint Films



Above: Titi De Baccarat as "Jean."

Left: Susan Clark and Tadin Brego in "Nice People."

chummy tavern catchup about their shared son leads to an unexpected revelation about what the ex-husband does for cash. "Lesedi" follows a young Black woman (Lala Drew) as she and her white girlfriend navigate the process of renting an apartment, leading to a nearly unspoken fight about race. "Shane" sees an older man (William Paul Steele) trying to find the owner of the dead cat he's accidentally run over, only to walk into a fraught

family confrontation between transgender Shane (Ian-Meredyth Lindsey) and a worrisome visitor. "Jean" sees a suspicious aunt and idealistic teen (Grace Bauer and Maiya Kolosky) deciding whether or not to assist French-speaking Black man Jean (Titi De Baccarat), who appears to be attempting to sneak across the Canadian border. Concluding things are "Zed & Larry" (Tadin Brego and Michael Thomas Toth), two drinking buddies who have an

especially bad day at the fish-processing plant where they both work.

The films share a decidedly Maine-centric universe. A minor character from the first segment anchors "Jean," while Jean himself turns up in "Lesedi," performing a puppet show that briefly makes the troubled Lesedi smile. Names crop up around the margins of shared streets and water-

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ing holes, suggesting the fact that Maine is, for all its vastness, a pretty small town. The credits thank Howie's Pub in Portland, Evelyn's Tavern in South Portland, a store in Jackman, and a Commercial Street fish market. The people of "Nice People" drink, work and drive the same roads we do, and they feel uniformly akin to people we might meet in any of those places. The actors, culled from a who's who of Maine talents (at least to those of us who follow the Maine movie scene) are pitch-perfect in their roles throughout. And they have to be. What Griecci and Carlsen are attempting is of the highest degree of difficulty.

The filmmakers have cited as inspiration a trio of filmmakers who traffic solely in the difficult – Robert Altman, Jim Jarmusch and Aki Kaurismäki. All three favor naturalistic, often ambiguous interactions among eccentric but low-key realistic characters, their films intentionally attuned to their own singular wavelengths. It's a wavelength I've always been attuned to, but viewers expecting more traditionally "cinematic" narratives often tune out. "Nice People" aims not merely high but far, seeking to maintain a consistent tone through its intertwining

narratives.

It hits, almost unerringly. Askari and Campbell bring such obvious charm and affection to their restless exes that the near-miss reunion over Askari's secret life tingles with life and humor. Lala Drew makes the perennially watchful Lesedi's quick temper a potent depiction of being Black, and a woman, in a very white place. Steele's unfortunate cat-killer is so doggedly decent that his unplanned involvement in a vulnerable stranger's life comes across like an equally strange reward. De Baccarat's Jean keeps his story to himself, leading to one of those ambiguous endings where the ordinariness of human misunderstanding seems headed for avoidable disaster. And while Tadin Brego shoulders a lot of white male angst as the grieving and lovesick Zed, Zed's drunken quest for – something – is redeemed in satisfyingly unsatisfying fashion. It's that kind of movie.

There's a death, several reunions, lots of booze, some unexpected shocks and pleasures. It's life in Maine, and "Nice People" is as warm in its embrace as it is merciless in showing how we, while doing our best, often fall flat on our faces. The film is shot beautifully and with an eye for its varied Maine locations, all without succumbing to mere travelogue. The dialogue is unforced and lived-in, and the sto-

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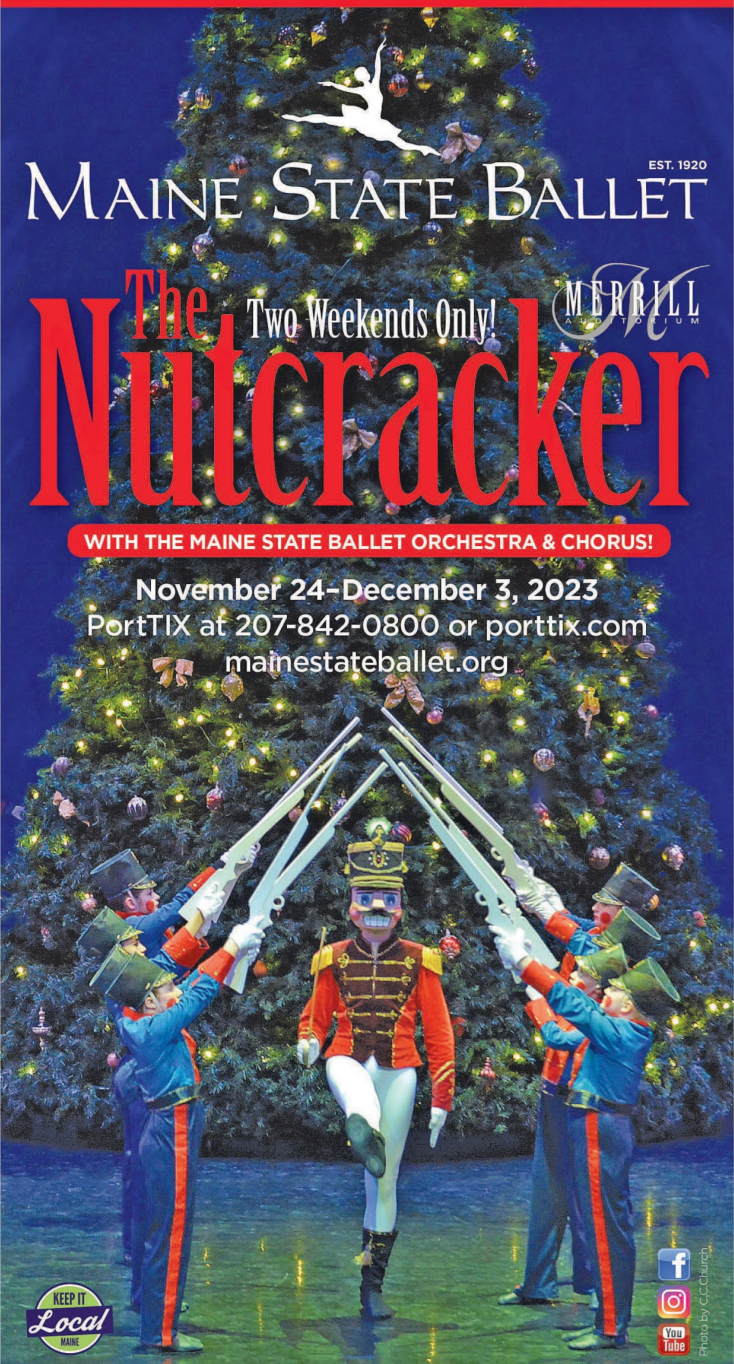
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Photo by C.C. Church

PONTI

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rate, the song choices tremendous and the vibe is arguably one of the happiest you want to be immersed in. Trust me on this.

Everyone in the band, and by the way there could be a few special guests, has been playing in Portland and a few other parts of the country for many years. Their musical DNA is everywhere, and the 12 core members who will be on stage on Aura on Nov. 25 are a who's who of wildly

talented singers and musicians.

Along with Divinsky, Boyden and Genova, this year's Model Airplane line-up is Tyler Quist (keys), Dane Farnsworth (keys), Lucas Desmond (sax), Brian Graham (sax), Chris Sweet (percussion), Gina Alibrio (vocals), Kenya Hall (vocals), Phil Divinsky (vocals).

I smell a sell-out, so don't sleep on tickets.

Model Airplane Funksgiving

9 p.m. Nov. 25. Aura, 121 Center St., Portland, \$25, 18-plus. auramaine.com

Aimsel Ponti — 207-791-6455

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ries are given time to build – and never quite end up where you imagined. “Nice People” relishes ambiguity, and trusts viewers to follow along. I followed. So should you.

“Nice People” is screening at Portland’s Space on Thursday and Friday. The 7 p.m. shows on both days sold out, but there were still tickets (\$9, \$7 Space members) available for a 3:30 p.m. matinee Friday as of last week, so be sure to grab yours now at space538.org for one of the best Maine-made films I’ve ever had the pleasure of seeing. Griecci and Carlsen will present the film and answer questions. Keep an eye on their Mint Films website for upcoming screenings as well.



Photo courtesy of Mint Films

Lala Drew as Lesedi in “Nice People.”

Dennis Perkins is a freelance writer who lives in Auburn with his wife and cat.

TRIVIA

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WHERE: Elsmere BBQ, 448 Cottage Road, South Portland; 207-619-1948, elsmerebbq.com

WHEN: 6 p.m. Wednesdays

WHAT TO EXPECT: Hosted by Best Worst Trivia. Six rounds of 10 questions, about half on topics requested from previous week. Teams of six or less eligible to win prizes. Arrive early for a good table.

WHERE: Foundation Brewing Co., 1 Industrial Way, Suite 7, Portland; 207-370-5180, foundationbrewing.com

WHEN: 6 p.m. Wednesdays

WHAT TO EXPECT: Hosted by Hardly Trivial; prizes for first and second place teams.

WHERE: Federal Jack’s, 8 Western Ave., Kennebunk; 207-967-4322, federaljacks.com

WHEN: 6 p.m. Wednesdays

WHAT TO EXPECT: Hosted by Game Time Trivia. Fun, general knowledge

questions broken into eight rounds, including picture, audio and wager rounds.

WHERE: Maine Beer Cafe, 439 Route 1, Kittery; 207-475-5655, mainebeercafe.com

WHEN: 6 p.m. Wednesdays

WHAT TO EXPECT: Hosted by Game Time Trivia. Fun, general knowledge questions broken into eight rounds, including picture, audio and wager rounds.

WHERE: Mast Landing Brewing Co., 920 Main St., Westbrook, and 200 Lower Main St., Freeport; mastlandbrewing.com

WHEN: 6 p.m. (Freeport) and 6:30 p.m. (Westbrook) Wednesdays

WHAT TO EXPECT: Wide range of questions and categories, including pop culture, history, music and more. Pints are \$1 off; food available from Nighthawk’s Kitchen in Freeport and Fat Kid Culinary productions in Westbrook.

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LIVE MUSIC LINEUP

— By Aimsel Ponti, Staff Writer



Photo by the artist

Beth Nielsen Chapman

8 p.m. Sunday. One Longfellow Square, 181 State St., Portland, \$25 in advance, \$35 day of show. onelongfellowsquare.com

Singer-songwriter Beth Nielsen Chapman is known just as much for her songwriting work as she is for her own recordings. Her credits include Faith Hill’s smash hit “This Kiss,” and she’s written for the likes of Bette Midler, Tanya Tucker and Willie Nelson. Nielsen Chapman’s own discography dates back to 1980, and the Grammy-nominated artist’s latest album is last year’s “Crazy Town.”

Joan Ellison: Love Finds Judy Garland

7:30 p.m. Saturday. Camden Opera House, 29 Elm St., \$35 in advance, \$45 day of show. camdenoperahouse.com

New York City-based vocalist Joan Ellison loves Judy Garland immensely and has the vocal chops to play proper tribute to her. Ellison will be accompanied by pianist Shane Schag and cellist Nora Willauer. The Love Finds Judy Garland show features a smile-inducing array of some of Garland’s most beloved tunes, including “The Trolley Song,” “I Got Rhythm,” “Get Happy” and Garland’s signature song, “Over the Rainbow.” If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, so can you. Just grab some tickets and your troubles will melt like lemon drops.

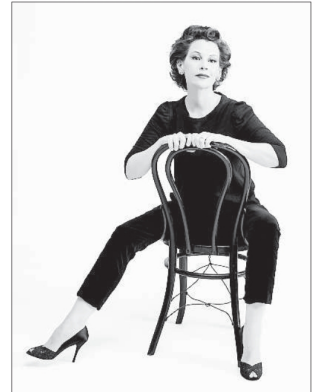


Photo by Beth Segal



Russ Dillingham/Sun Journal

Robert Washington performs at the Great Falls Balloon Festival at Simard Payne Memorial Park in Lewiston.

Elvis Tribute with Robert Washington

7 p.m. Friday. The Franco Center, 46 Cedar St., Lewiston, \$30 in advance, \$35 day of show. francocenter.org

Heads up, Elvis Presley fans! An epic tribute show is coming to Lewiston in the form of Robert Washington. Washington has been perfecting his act for decades, and his vocals are tremendous. He became the first Black performer to be named World Champion Impersonator at an annual competition in Memphis. Along with all the songs you love from Presley, Washington will toss in a few James Brown tunes for good measure.