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Get on the 'Shortbus



COLLAR ID Socializing in New York is bound to get kinky in "Shortbus."

A buzzed-about indie film is a happy, sweet — and sexually explicit — New York story

BY MICHAEL GILTZ



The new movie "Shortbus," opening Wednesday, is a valentine to New York — or at least, the idealized New York that exists in the minds of the dreamers who flock here from all over the country. It's a New York where misfits and the lonely can connect up at events like the title gathering, a semiregular "happening" where a sex therapist who can't have an orgasm and a gay couple who maybe want to spice up their relationship will be welcomed with very open arms.

"It's a New York film, but not in the sense that a Woody Allen film or a Martin Scorsese or even a Jim Jarmusch film is," says director John Cameron Mitchell, who made headlines around the world when he posted a casting call looking for actors who were willing to have sex on camera for this nonpornographic drama.

"This is a real immigrant's tale. All these characters are immigrants. Woody Allen is dealing with the fact that all his relatives are in the neighborhood and coming over to his house in the upper East Side. In our case, none of us really started here and maybe we still have a starry-eyed view of it."

The film is 'everything the city stands for.'

Mitchell can be excused if the stars are still in his eyes. His Off-Broadway musical "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" became a legitimate phenomenon that morphed into a successful, well-reviewed feature film. Now he has followed it with "Shortbus."

While making an independent film is never easy, the \$2 million "Shortbus" has overcome the timidity of investors and enjoyed a charmed, rapturous premiere at Cannes, followed by more applause at the Toronto Film Festival and now a homecoming to New York that feels right.

"I always keep my expectations low so as not to be disappointed," says the 43-year-old Mitchell. "But this has really outstripped anything we could have hoped for. Granted, we don't know what's going to happen nationally. But ... we're booked in over 60 theaters around the country. [National theater owners] are booking it because they really smell money. And some of them are actually moved by the film, which is always good, too."

For real-life New York couple Paul Dawson and PJ DeBoy — who play "the two Jamies" in the film and are

at the center of a three-way that includes the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" — watching people get into the spirit of the film has been a kick. Despite being tagged as controversial, it has been warming up audiences.

"In Toronto, we saw it with two older women sitting next to us," says DeBoy. "When the first explicit scene came up, they said, 'Oh my God! That's disgusting!' And yet they were thrilled about it, too. When the movie was going into another sexual area, one would grab the other one and say, 'Here we go!'"

"I think when you give people a chance to be challenged, they welcome that challenge."

Opening the film here is the least stressful stage of the journey for Mitchell, because, he says, "Shortbus" is wrapped up in everything the city stands for.

"We love New York, and this film could not have been made anywhere else," says Mitchell. "Maybe artists are being slowly priced out ... but I get a feeling of optimism when I see young people still moving here because it's New York." ♦

