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Film

Surviving the Seventh Grade

IN WRITER-DIRECTOR Todd Solondz's bitterly funny *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (Sony Pictures Classics), 11-year-old Dawn Weiner endures a seventh grade gauntlet of taunts and abuse from her schoolmates, a swooning crush on an older boy, and rough come-ons from the school delinquent. Anyone who has ever felt different or rejected will cringe in sympathy when the gawky Dawn (played by Heather Matarazzo) is called "pig-face" and "dyke." Dawn's only friend is Ralphie, a sweet little boy who's probably gay. She defends him from the others but—this being real life—when they fight, she calls him a faggot herself.

When the nebbishy and articulate Solondz gets together with his now 13-year-old star at a Manhattan coffee shop to compare notes on school and their movie (open-

ing on May 24), Matarazzo makes it clear that the art of name-calling still flourishes in the eighth grade. "They call them 'faggot,'" she says, cataloguing the insults. "They call them 'retard.' They call them 'a-hole.' And now I'm like, 'Would you knock it off? You don't know what you're doing to this person. You're tearing apart their soul with these words that you think are, like, funny.'"

Solondz's childhood wasn't quite so gallant. "Me standing up in front of all the bullies? Are you kidding? I think I was more like the character Troy," he says, referring to a smart, nerdy boy who's punched around by some older kids. "But the difference between him and me is that I was much faster. So I actually never did get beaten up."

Welcome to the Dollhouse is rated R because of its frank language—language the director knew was necessary to show how kids talk. "Certain words are permissible," says Solondz, who's straight. "People don't go around calling Jews 'kikes' and so on, but 'faggot' is totally part and parcel of the accepted vocabulary. That double standard is something gays live with."

Almost as bad as being taunted is being ignored, which is what happened to Solondz's first film, *Fear, Anxiety, and Depression* (1989). The director turned his back on two Hollywood studio development deals and taught English as a second language for five years before deciding to give independent filmmaking one more shot with *Dollhouse*. So far, so good: The feature won the top prize at January's Sundance Film Festival.

Meanwhile, Matarazzo's biggest worry is making sure no one at school thinks she's stuck up just because she made a movie. And she's got her future mapped out. "I told Mom I'm going to Yale and then I'm moving to the East Village." Solondz spends much of the meal listening admiringly to her talk about gay people ("They're still a person; it doesn't matter what sex they like") and the serious issues raised by his very funny movie. When everyone gets ready to leave, Patti Smith is singing "Gloria" on Matarazzo's Walkman, and Solondz says, "You're much cooler than I'll ever be." He's probably right—just don't let her friends hear him say that.—MICHAEL GILTZ

CLASS CLOWNS:
The star and director of *Welcome to the Dollhouse*.

Michael Giltz also contributes to Entertainment Weekly and Encore.