

Split personality

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [July 3, 2002](#) issue

As played by the remarkable actor Ryan Gosling, Danny Balint is one of the most unconventional and compelling characters on the screen this year. In *The Believer*, Danny is a brilliant, charismatic young man who denies his Jewish parentage (he claims Balint is a German name), joins a crew of neo-Nazi thugs and rises to the forefront of a fledgling fascist organization. But he's haunted by the heritage he believes he despises. He makes plans to assassinate a distinguished Jewish philanthropist but turns aside at the crucial moment. He and his friends desecrate a synagogue, but when one of the others drags out the sacred scroll containing the Torah, he protects it, taunting his buddies for not knowing the first thing about the people they say they hate. He goes so far as to take the scroll home, where it sits in his closet like a challenge from the God he's been defying.

Gosling's strategy for expressing the conflict at the heart of this character is to affect a raw, brutish presence that's constantly thrown into question by his intellectual side. He stalks into a brawl with the cockiness of a drunken longshoreman, but when he argues his point of view he sounds like a Talmudic debater, pushing an idea as far as it will go and then provocatively shifting ground. (Gosling was also extraordinary as the rich teen sociopath in the Leopold-and-Loeb-inspired thriller *Murder by Numbers*.)

Danny's mentor (Theresa Russell), a Manhattan matron with the unfortunate name of Lina Moebius (a literary conceit that the writer-director, Henry Bean, should have resisted), is sufficiently impressed with Danny to make him the featured speaker at a fund-raiser even though she finds his rabid anti-Semitism *démodé* and possibly off-putting for the kind of benefactors she hopes to attract. Facing the crowd, he switches tactics dramatically, imploring his listeners to learn to love the Jew because that's the only way to defeat a race that defines itself by the hatred of others.

You never know exactly what to make of Danny (at least not until the tacked-on resolution). Bean doesn't know either, yet he tries to use Danny for the purposes of social commentary. *The Believer* is a clumsy, earnest thesis picture with an antihero

who's too slippery and full of contradictions to support a thesis. Movies about white-supremacist youths like the character Edward Norton played in *American History X* tend to be static and obvious because there's only one reasonable way to respond to a violent fanatic who's dripping bile. It's admirable that Bean wanted a character who frustrates easy analysis at the center of his movie, but as a writer he lacks the imagination to construct a complex scenario around Danny, and as a director his approach is as stodgy and blunt as if he were making *American History X*--he forces every scene to make a point.

As a result, scene by scene the film doesn't make sense. When Danny and his pals are arrested for starting a fight in a kosher restaurant, a judge sends them to sensitivity training, where they listen to Holocaust survivors tell their horror stories. But why would these aging, ghost-ridden Jews consent to share their histories with hatemongering hoodlums? If Lina is wary of Danny's stance on the subject of Jews, why does she invite him to speak to potential donors?

Most puzzling of all is Danny's girl friend, Lina's daughter Carla (Summer Phoenix), a bright young woman with masochistic desires who begins by being curious about Danny's fascination with Judaism and ends by practicing it herself. Phoenix's tough-hide conviction in Carla's last few scenes is touching, but there's no way to put together the elements of this character logically, unless you decide that her interest in Judaism is another kind of masochistic capitulation. We're meant to see what happens to Carla as a form of salvation. But how does her progression fit into the story of a young man who's too complicated to be viewed through the same lens?

Gosling towers above the movie, and he and Phoenix give the only worthwhile performances. You have to wonder at a filmmaker who possesses the good taste to cast an actor like Gosling but puts both Theresa Russell and Billy Zane (as Lina's partner, the neofascist leader Curtis Zampf) at the head of his supporting cast. Zane, the wooden villain of *Titanic*, barely makes an impression, though he's supposed to be playing a powerful demagogue. Russell, who's been appearing in movies for half a century, still has no understanding of how to physicalize a character--she suggests a peasant transplanted to Manhattan. (The costume designers don't help her out much.) Bean did have the good luck to land a first-rate cinematographer, Jim Denault, whose specialty is bringing energy and style to intimate, hand-made films. Between Denault's work and Gosling's, there's always something to watch in this odd, mixed-up picture.