

Sales job

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [June 7, 2000](#) issue

*The Big Kahuna* (1999), directed by John Swanbeck

Depersonalizing the buyer is the key to efficient selling. That's not an entirely unexpected theme in a film about three salesmen. What is unexpected in *The Big Kahuna* is the specific corollary to that statement: depersonalizing the buyer is the key to the efficient selling of Christ.

The seller in this case is a salesman named Bob (Peter Facinelli), a young, earnest, refuses-to-drink-or-swear-or-smoke Christian. The other two salesmen are older and more accomplished: the sarcastic, brazen Larry (Kevin Spacey) and the passive and melancholy Phil (Danny DeVito, in his best performance yet). All three are part of a marketing team selling industrial lubricants. The title character is known for being able to buy lots and lots of lubricant. Bob, Larry and Phil hold a get-together for the Kahuna and 20 less consequential customers. The Kahuna comes to the soiree, but Bob is the only person who chats with him, and Bob doesn't even realize that he is the Kahuna until later. But they have lucked out: the Kahuna invites Bob to another party that evening to continue their discussion. Larry and Phil reluctantly prep Bob to sell the Kahuna on their lubricants and to try to get the Kahuna to meet with the three of them the next day.

"What did you talk about, Bob?" Larry asks upon Bob's return. Bob's answer: "We talked about Christ." (I know, this sounds like a VeggieTales episode right now.) Larry is less than pleased with this answer. What follows are numerous minutes of Larry and Bob yelling about the meeting over Phil's occasional hushed comment, "We'll be all right."

It becomes apparent that the way Bob talks to others about Christianity is the same way Larry talks to prospective buyers about lubricant. Both strike up friendly conversations, waiting for the moment to interject their agenda into the conversation. The only difference is that in the one case they're listening for "Gee, my gizmo-making machines sure are grinding a lot lately," and in the other case for confessions like "My wife just died and I feel so lonely without her caress."

Roger Rueff, who wrote the play (*Hospitality Suite*) on which *The Big Kahuna* is based as well as the film's screenplay, doesn't criticize or downplay either Larry's or Bob's worldview. In the film, both Larry and Bob have legitimate arguments for trying to make the Kahuna hear their side; Larry is scared of losing his job and Bob wants to keep the Kahuna from going to hell. Bob and Larry argue over the tactics that the other uses, the irony being that the tactics are the same: the simplification of the listener to a set of levers that must be set at precise positions to get the correct feedback, whether it be gallons of lubricant sold or one more life for Jesus.

Reviewers have often tossed off comparisons to David Mamet's work, mainly because Mamet's play *Glengarry Glen Ross* is also about salesmen and the subsequent film starred Kevin Spacey. Mamet's works are about tricksters, con men, people always out to put one over on someone else. Mamet's characters deal in masks, nearly always trading blunt honesty for indirectness and subtlety. The characters in *The Big Kahuna*, on the other hand, are extremely direct, not terribly subtle, and seem to believe in what they are selling. There is little point in a comparison; the films have as much in common as *Babe: Pig in the City* and *Animal Farm*.

Rueff's directness is painfully obvious in the last 15 minutes, the nadir of the film. Larry has left by this time, upset over Bob's conversation with the Kahuna. Phil starts talking like a father to Bob and says, essentially, "You're so much like Larry! If you would only realize it! And I'm not saying this just for your benefit; I'm trying to help the audience understand the subtext." In case we don't get it, strains of Baz Luhrmann's "Everybody's Free (to Wear Sunscreen)" are played over the closing credits.

It's unfortunate that the ending drains the momentum from Rueff's screenplay; ditch that and Facinelli's occasional inability to quite nail the role of Bob, and *The Big Kahuna* would be one of the top films of the year. It's a thoughtful take on a worthy topic, and it's largely entertaining: I didn't notice until more than midway through the film that 90 percent of it took place in one room, probably because I was distracted by the film's terrific jaunty dialogue. Still, if we are going to make comparisons, I'd say I'd prefer to see just about any film by Mamet.