

Dark Horse

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [August 8, 2012](#) issue

Writer-director Todd Solondz is the patron saint of schlubs and schlemiels. From his award-winning debut film *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996) through a series of low-budget projects, he casts an empathic eye on outsiders who can't catch a break, no matter how hard they try.

His latest foray into this heart of dimness is *Dark Horse*, a curious tragi-comedy about Abe (Jordan Gelber), a pudgy thirtysomething who still lives with his parents in his boyhood room, works for his dad (Christopher Walken) in a real estate office (where he ups the ante on laziness) and is constantly coddled by his doting mother (Mia Farrow). And, of course, his older brother Richard (Justin Bartha) is a successful doctor.

The film begins, as Solondz films are wont to do, with a simple conversation. The occasion is a wedding at which Abe aggressively chats up Miranda (Selma Blair), who is cute but distracted. To Abe's amazement, Miranda reluctantly gives him her phone number, and a sad and perplexing relationship develops. Along the way, we discover that Miranda is clinically depressed, half-comatose from prescription drugs, and ready to abandon any dreams she's ever had of happiness or success. She makes it clear that marrying someone like Abe is the next logical step, since it follows her pattern of descent into final despair.

Most men might be put off by this brutally honest declaration, but not Abe. Figuring that this is as good as it's going to get for him, he jumps at the chance to wed.

What Abe can't foresee, however, is that like in a Greek tragedy, the worst is yet to come. And with this new information, Solondz abruptly leaps into Abe's subconscious, where he has discussions with people who are there one minute and gone the next. These subconscious chats should not be confused with the kind of self-examination we are used to seeing in Woody Allen films. Solondz delves into a darker world than Allen, and his meanderings not only reflect the contempt that Abe has for himself beneath his bombast and bravado, but also suggest a man who may

very well be losing his mind.

The key participant in these revealing dialogues is Marie (Donna Murphy), his father's dowdy secretary, who seems to be the only one who senses both Abe's despair and his well-masked potential. To accentuate this point, Solondz has her appear to Abe in two personas: the meek woman we meet in the office, and a Mrs. Robinson type who enjoys abusing men before devouring them.

As Abe's fractured narrative continues, the film becomes more ambiguous—Solondz dares us to figure out which scenes and storylines are real and which exist only in Abe's cluttered mind. This high-wire act is carried through a series of dramatic plot twists, with consequences that combine the irony of Solondz's eye with the futility of Abe's life.

What seems certain, however, is that despite his chutzpah and his deeply buried humanity, Abe doesn't have a chance of coming out on top. To Todd Solondz, that is the way of things, like it or not.