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Let Them Chirp Awhile

A Blitstein-Film release and production. (International sales: Houston King, Los Angeles.) Produced by Jonathan Blitstein, Anouk Frosch. Directed, written, edited by Jonathan Blitstein.

With: Justin Rice, Brendan Sexton III, Zach Galligan, Pepper Binkley, Amy Chow, Laura Breckenridge, Charlotte Af Geijerstam.

By [RONNIE SCHEIB](#)

Artistic aspirations and romantic entanglements stalk the East Village streets in tyro helmer Jonathan Blitstein's goofily engaging Gotham comedy, "Let Them Chirp Awhile." Fresh out of NYU film school, Blitstein films what he knows: His tale of a young filmmaker's writer's block gleefully incorporates all manner of antic styles, from Mack Sennett-style double-takes to Felliniesque black-and-white pantomime. That Blitstein pulls off this tiredly self-reflexive conceit with relative panache is due in no small part to the scruffy grace of leads Justin Rice ("Mutual Appreciation") and indie fixture Brendon Sexton III. Opening Dec. 5 in New York, "Chirp" may roost awhile.

Bobby (Rice), attempting to write his first screenplay, lives largely inside his own mind. When not engaging in stream-of-consciousness voiceover to vent his doubts and frustrations, or getting sidetracked by infinite irrelevancies and false starts, he lies about his progress while casually hooking up with current g.f. Dara (Laura Breckenridge), a college frosh some seven years his junior, or hanging out with lifelong best bud Scott (Sexton).

Unlike the idealistic Bobby, Scott always waffles between two extremes -- his day job as corporate marketer and his nighttime work as rock musician wannabe -- and similarly wavers between Michelle (Pepper Binkley), his live-in girlfriend of four years, and Ariel (Amy Chow),

his Korean mistress of four months. Most tellingly, Scott's moral compass falls somewhere between Bobby's upright humanism and the cynical egomania of Bobby's nemesis, successful playwright Hart (Zach Galligan).

Encroaching on Neil LaBute/Woody Allen territory with a callowness that almost proves charming, Blitstein maintains an absurdist distance from his characters' hangups that sometimes turns literal, such as when the camera follows a couple's argument from blocks away. At the same time, an "Umberto D"-like subplot, wherein Bobby loses the Jack Russell terrier entrusted to his reluctant care by an ex-girlfriend, occasions pic's most parodic, over-the-top closeup reactions of panic and desperation (no "Wendy and Lucy," this).

But Blitstein's lead actors consistently translate awkward self-consciousness into effortlessly executed soft-shoe. Rice brings a boyish ingenuousness to his role that disarms all comers, and his interactions with Sexton, a past master at self-sabotage of every stripe, transform potentially awkward exchanges into seamless setpieces.

This perfectly modulated control of tone rarely extends much further than the tete-a-tetes where these two thesps hold sway, however. The difficulty Bobby expresses in relating to the world outside his head also plagues his creator. Thus, although a pretentious 9/11-set play by the ever-opportunistic Hart is wonderfully awful, Bobby's shushed expressions of shocked disbelief seem forced, as does the gushing audience's inane praise.

Tech credits are a cut above most location-shot no-budgeters, Blitstein having opted to shoot in 35mm.

Camera (color), Andrew Shulkind; music, Giulio Carmassi; production designer, Michael Bednark; art director, David Brenner; sound, Josh Neal; supervising sound editor/sound designer, Cory Choy; casting, Blitstein, Heidi Handelsman. Reviewed on DVD, New York, November 28, 2008. Running time: 92 MIN.

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