



### **Forgiving the Franklins (2006)**

*The four members of the stodgy, conservative, ultra-religious Franklin family live their lives around what is proper, until a car crash puts Frank (Robertson Dean), Betty (Teresa Willis), and their son Brian (Vince Pavia) into direct contact with Jesus, who removes their sense of shame. Returned to Earth, the three find new meaning in life, but their behavior upsets daughter Caroline (Aviva), shocks their friend Peggy (Mari C. Blackwell), and alienates them from society.*

It is not uncommon for the film festival circuit to be filled with unengaging, pretentious, slice-of-life pictures that say nothing of interest or importance. They exist on the screen for two hours, and then disappear, only to appear at other film festivals before disappearing forever. The SunDance Film Festival's booklet, which tends to describe every movie as if it is a documentary on depressed, inner-city, single mothers, gave little reason to think *Forgiving the Franklins* would be anything unusual. Ah, I love it when I'm surprised, and this is a movie that surprises in almost every way. Smart, accessible, and fall-from-your-chair funny, *Forgiving the Franklins* is everything that film should be.

Writer-director-producer Jay Floyd presents us with rigid, repressed people that may look more familiar than anyone would like to admit. The Franklins are upstanding members of their town and church. These are the kind of people that can always be counted on, that get things done, and are completely humorless. Then he twists them, using them to examine all the hypocrisies of modern life. Rapidly, it becomes as difficult for the viewer to understand shame as it is for the Franklins. Certainly a majority of the satire is focused on conservative Christian institutions and behaviors, but this is not an anti-religious film. Nor is it a simple one. It isn't even always a comedy. Floyd has a better handle on humor than tragedy, and the film is at its most effective when it is light, but the more serious elements are reminders that this isn't material to simply enjoy and then forget. This is a movie that will stick with you.

While the script is what places *Forgiving the Franklins* high above normal cinematic fare, it wouldn't work without a cast that can handle the extremes of emotion and tone, and this cast has no weak members. Aviva (who misplaced her last name sometime in the last few years) and Pavia have long careers ahead of them, as does the captivating Blackwell. Dean displays an uncommon ease with comedy while acting as a powerful presence, but it is Willis who is a revelation. Her role as the bland, holier-than-thou housewife who becomes a sexy, caring icon of what life is about, is the pivotal one in the picture, and few actresses could carry it off. I was astonished at how sexless she appeared at the movie's start, and how desirable she became as it progressed, without a noticeable change in makeup or other non-acting aids.

One of the best films of the year (if it had been released a month earlier, it would have deserved Oscar nominations in at least three of the major categories), *Forgiving the Franklins* has yet to be picked up for distribution. Perhaps the big companies fear it will be a difficult sell, with its controversial subject matter, candid discussion of sexuality, and nudity, but don't most people enjoy the latter two? As for the first, *Forgiving the Franklins* isn't controversial, just insightful. No one left the Sundance screening ready to argue. But everyone seemed ready to think.