

NEW MOVIES REVIEWED AND RATED | FEBRUARY 8 — MARCH 6, 2016

# InCinemas

EDITED by JAMES JENNINGS

THE EMPIRE MOVIE GUIDE | UNMISSABLE ★★☆☆★ EXCELLENT ★★☆☆★ GOOD ★★☆☆★ POOR ★★☆☆★ TRAGIC ★

## Anomalisa

★★★★★

OUT NOW / RATED MA15+ / 90 MINS.

**DIRECTORS** Charlie Kaufman, Duke Johnson

**CAST** David Thewlis, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Tom Noonan

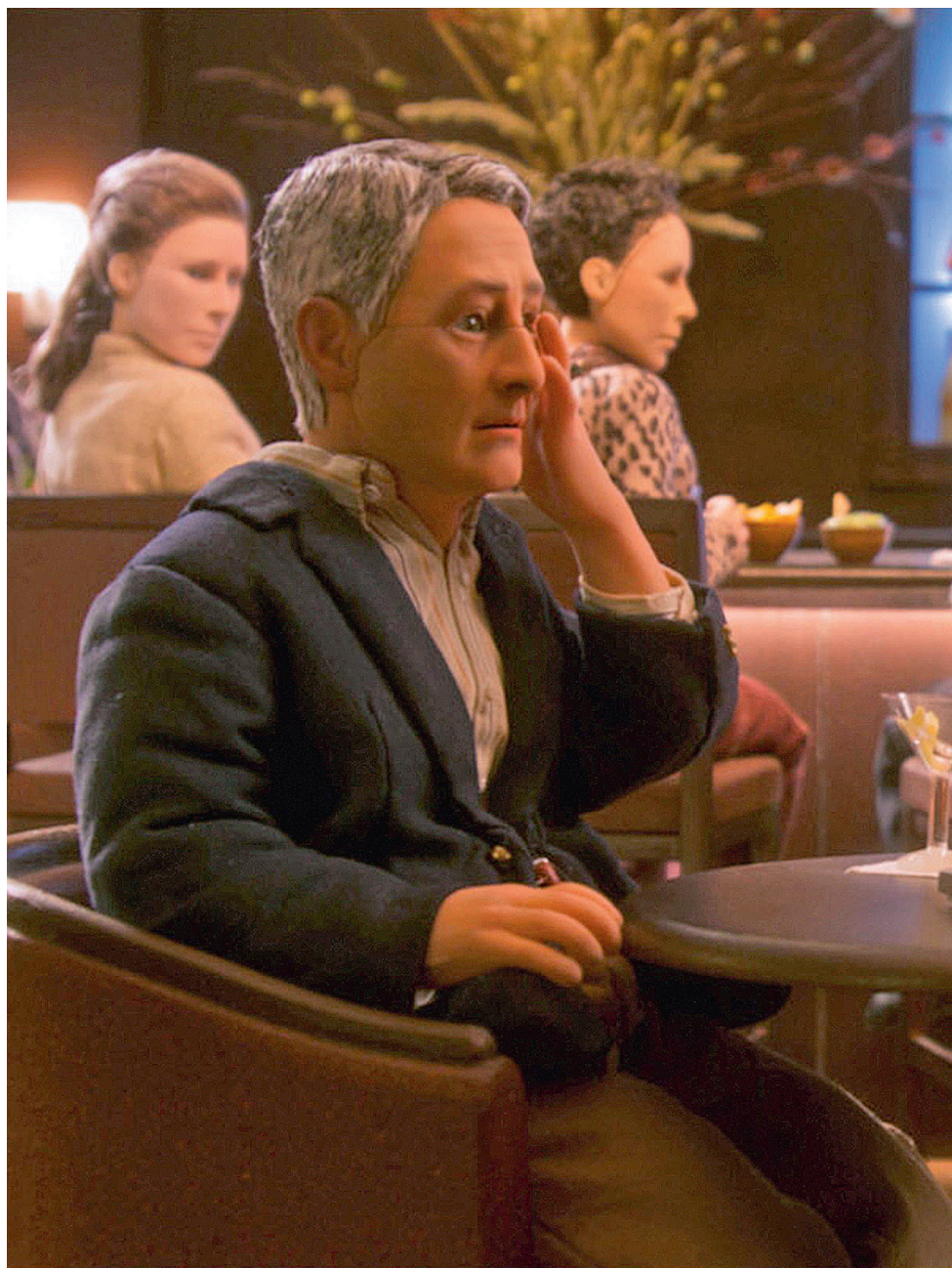
**PLOT** Visiting Cincinatti to give a talk on customer service, author Michael Stone (Thewlis) finds his mundane life given a shake-up when he meets the seemingly average Lisa (Jason Leigh), an insecure woman in town to see his seminar.

### FROM 1999'S BEING JOHN

Malkovich to 2008's *Synecdoche, New York*, writer-director Charlie Kaufman has made a successful film career out of

mining particularly heady subject matters: the blurry interplay between fiction and reality (*Adaptation*, *Confessions Of A Dangerous Mind*), the very nature of identity (*Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*) and the dark corners to be explored within the murky world of human psychology (his entire filmography, really). Kaufman challenges audiences to look at familiar subject matters from entirely new vantage points, and his latest effort, *Anomalisa* (co-directed by Duke Johnson), does all of the above in the most Kaufmanesque way possible: via discombobulating stop-motion animation.

Motivational speaker and author Michael Stone (voiced by David Thewlis) — a man who specialises in customer service — is a deeply unhappy soul, a man bludgeoned by the mundanity of his existence and ironically unable to genuinely connect with others. We see the







Michael (David Thewlis) tries it on with ex, Bella (Tom Noonan).

world through Michael's eyes, and, in a play on the memorable scene in *Being John Malkovich* where Malkovich himself sees a world populated by nothing but people sporting his voice and face, Michael sees everybody else as having the very same face — not his — and voice (Tom Noonan), whether they be man, woman or child. Michael's world is a lonely trudge, his attempts to connect (including with an ex-flame, despite his married-with-kid status) ultimately futile. Then he hears the unique voice of dowdy, insecure sales rep Lisa (Jennifer Jason Leigh), and he becomes obsessed with an apparent individual in a sea of familiarity. For the equally lonely Lisa — unable to process why anyone would be interested in her — Michael becomes her knight in shining armour. Simple, right? Well, no.

This is Kaufmanland, remember, and while still a relatable and very human story about loneliness and connecting

with others, there's a lot more going on than meets the eye. The initially distracting stop-motion animation soon takes on the guise of a rather profound metaphor for the way identities are constructed and are usually superficial; the connecting seams that piece us together visible if you look closely enough. The disparity between Michael and Lisa's worldview is also illuminating: the former a possible narcissist who seemingly has it all but fails to find contentment; the latter naive and a little simple but a person capable of allowing true happiness into their heart.

If it all sounds like a stack of inscrutable psychology text books presented in the form of a weird puppet movie (granted, there is a scene where you see puppets having sex), rest assured that *Anomalisa* is also an incredibly funny film: the laughs are consistent throughout, whether it's Michael swearing while trying

to adjust the temperature of a shower or scattered callbacks to a gag involving the Cincinnati zoo. Much like *Mary Poppins*, Kaufman is well aware that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.

*Anomalisa*'s only real deficit is an ending that feels a little abrupt: Kaufman succeeds at sucking us into his strange world so well that it's easy to feel the lights have come on too soon. This immersion ultimately comes down to the flawed, complex characters of Michael and Lisa: Kaufman's grand trick is to have you quickly forget that the two leads are made of rods and felt, and despite any ugliness involved — chiefly from Michael — have your heart quietly break for the pair of them. **JAMES JENNINGS**

**VERDICT** By turns funny, odd, profound and moving, *Anomalisa* is Kaufman working his weird wonders on a film that lingers long after the final credits roll.