'Girl Interrupted' a sentimental look at '60s upheaval

By Stephanie Angelyn Casola
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The past is often referred to as being something of "a simpler time." But writer Susanna Kaysen, whose story "Girl Interrupted" can be seen in theaters, begs to differ.

In 1967, a time of social and political upheaval, 17-year-old Kaysen (portrayed by Winona Ryder) can't seem to get a handle on the crazy world surrounding her. Like other teenage girls, she's confused, insecure and depressed.

The difference between Susanna and most other teenagers living in that era is her choice of escape — namely a cocktail of aspirin and vodka which nearly kills her. Her parents, concerned about what the neighbors will think, subject her to what seems to be the only solution.

Welcome to Claymoore Hospital, where the insane pop pills and fight their way through treatment, and where Susanna must stay until she finds the person she lost along the way. Based on the memoir "Girl Interrupted," by the Cambridge, Massachusetts writer, the story redefines the term "crazy." Director and screenwriter James Mangold ("Heavy") and director of photography Jack Green breathe life into a very personal story with universal themes: Self-realization and belonging.

Claymoore possesses the historic beauty of a college campus, with lush greenery surrounding its solid red brick walls. But inside, the hospital walls are nothing more than confinement to a group of women too young to have lived the lives they claim. Using pastels and muted tones inside the primary setting of the hospital, the film gives an air of a sanitized environment, dulling the senses to the life that exists outside. Barred windows, irongated staircases and nurses constantly checking on patients work together as elements that create a sense of entrapment, a place where no one is ever alone.

Susanna learns quickly of this lack of privacy. She requests a razor to shave her legs and it's accompanied by the watchful eye of Nurse Valerie (Whoopi Goldberg). Just another reminder of the freedom she has left behind.

At Claymoore, Susanna befriends a rag-tag troop of women: Georgina, her roommate who claims to be a pathological liar; Daisy, a prissy "Daddy's girl" with an unusual taste for rotisserie chicken and laxatives; Polly, a badly scarred girl whose never seemed to grow up and Janet, an anorexic. But the most intriguing character to enter the film is surely Lisa, convincingly portrayed by Angelina Jolie.

Lisa enters the hospital, with police escort, as the picture of strength — talking back to the nurses, flirting with an orderly and threatening anyone who gets in her way. She can't be confined.

Susanna begins to draw from that apparent strength – learning how to "tongue" her pills rather than swallow them and finding ways around the watchful eyes of the hospital staff. Her thoughts, fears and frustrations are kept in a journal by her bed.

"Girl Interrupted" whisks viewers into a place where insanity is normal. Susanna, who is diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder, must learn to believe in herself again. The inevitable transformation is shown with subtle imagery like a budding trees outside her window. It takes a suicide and a powerful confrontation to lead her to the world outside.

Seeking strength: *(Left to Right) Winona Ryder is Susanna Kaysen, a confused girl sent to a mental institution where she meets psychopathic Lisa (Angelina Jolie).*

In one scene, a television newscast blurts out "We live in a time of doubt." That tell-tale moment sets the stage for this slow-moving, yet poignant drama.

The music and costuming transports viewers back to a time when draft-dodgers were heading to Canada, Martin Luther King was assassinated and writing was accepted as a hobby, not a career. Arianne Phillips dresses characters in traditional hippy-style and contrasts them with others like Daisy who sports restrictive dresses and a perfectly molded flip hairdo. The sounds of Bob Dylan's "It's All Over Now Baby Blue," permeate the film, representing the shedding of the past life and empowerment for the future.

The story itself is based in internal emotions, manifested by the outside world. While the film achieves the same meaning, it may be better suited to a written format. On screen "Girl Interrupted" can seem lost, with a predictable ending, no matter how well-acted the scenes may be.

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THE BEACH
A young American sets off on an exotic adventure in Thailand, only to discover that the modern-day paradise hides some disturbing secrets. Stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert Carlyle.

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Nicholas "Oz" Oseransky is a nice dentist living in suburban Montreal. His new neighbor Jimmy "The Tulip" Tudeski is a hit man in hiding. Oz and Jimmy find themselves with something in common, someone's trying to kill them. Stars Matthew Perry, Bruce Willis and Rosanna Arquette.

Scheduled to open Friday, Feb. 18

DIAMONDS
A retired prize fighter embarks on a journey with his son and grandson to search for 13 long-lost diamonds. Stars Kirk Douglas, Lauren Bacall and Dan Ackroyd.

ROMZO MUST DIE
Kung Fu meets hip hop on the seedy waterfront of Oakland California, when a shaky truce between Asian and African American crime gangs disintegrate. Stars Jet Li and Delroy Lindo.

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A newly-released convict sets out to start a new life when he finds himself against a team of criminals who believe he has information on a job they're planning. Stars Ben Affleck, Gary Sinise and Charlize Theron.

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TURNELWEBBS
Contemporary drama of a single mother and her 12-year-old daughter who embark on a journey of self-discovery. Stars Janet McTeer and Kimberly Brown.

'Topsy-Turvy' examines dilemmas of Gilbert and Sullivan

By Frank Provenzano
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Dramatist William Gilbert and composer Arthur Sullivan had a knack for creating operas for the common man.

Yet Gilbert and Sullivan's talent and creative output is anything but common.

From the 1870s to the early 1890s, they collaborated on "Pirates of Penzance," "Gondoliers" "Sorcerer," "Trial By Jury," "H.M.S. Pinafore," "Grand Duke," "The Mikado," and seven other operas.

Many of the popular works infused with wit and contagious melodies inspired composers of 20th-century Broadway musicals.

But when does achieving wide popularity become stagnant and a burden for an artist searching to create original work? Is the conflict even more intense with a collaboration between two artist of dissimilar temperaments, such as Gilbert and Sullivan?

While that's the promising premise for "Topsy-Turvy," a film by Mike Lynch that opens Friday at the Maple Theater, there is only passing homage paid to resolving the dilemma.

Lynch, who also directed "Secrets and Lies," "Life Is Sweet," "Naked," and "Career Girls," takes a much broader course.

After nearly three hours of wandering between a documentary and mere character studies about Gilbert and Sullivan, the title of the film proves to be prophetic. "Topsy-Turvy" is utterly disordered.

As a story, "Topsy-Turvy" lacks the sense of dramatic urgency and expectation that something of great importance is at stake. It is too long, and gets mired in the intricacies and foibles of what goes at rehearsals for operas.

Simon Mein

Backstage drama: *Allan Corduner (left to right), and Jim Broadbent star as Arthur Sullivan and W.S. Gilbert in "Topsy-Turvy."*

But disordered doesn't mean unworthy. After all, this is the world where up is down and down is up. (The reference "topsy turvy" is to Gilbert's style of constructing a plot with logic-defying twists.)

With a stellar cast and fastidious attention to detail, "Topsy-Turvy" is a fascinating examination of the life and times in which Gilbert and Sullivan created their art. Perhaps a reason that the New York Film Critics named "Topsy-Turvy" as best film, and Lynch as best director.

Set in 1884, the story begins when a heat wave causes slow ticket sales at London's Savoy Theatre, where Gilbert and Sullivan's lackluster "Princess Ida" is playing.

Critics, too, are getting turned off by the formulatic, often-times slapstick operas. Gilbert (Jim Broadbent) pushes ahead. But Sullivan (Allan Corduner) is ready to move on and try his hand at more serious opera.

Their collaboration is held together only by contractual obligation. Sullivan rejects Gilbert's mechanical constructions, and claims that he's at the end of the line.

Then, quite serendipitously, Gilbert is inspired as he tours a Japanese exhibition. The result is Gilbert's most lyrical libretto, "The Mikado."

With Sullivan newly inspired by the story, "Topsy-Turvy" basically follows the rehearsal and production of the opera.

While the various subplots of the performers coming to grips with the demands of the stage dramatizes the type of commitment required to break new creative ground, there's little light shed on how "The Mikado" transformed the relationship between Gilbert and Sullivan.

Interestingly, their work on "The Mikado" was only a truce. Three years later, Gilbert and Sullivan's next opera, "Ruddigore," was less than stellar.

In the end, Gilbert grew verbose, and Sullivan simply lost his passion. That, from one of the most creative musical collaborators, is truly topsy-turvy.