'The Next Best Thing' for Madonna may not be movies

By Stephanie Angelyn Casola
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When pop star Madonna told the world she was having a child, with then-boyfriend Carlos Leon, it sent shock waves rippling from the media to households everywhere. She's never seemed to lead a conventional life, so her much-talked-about pregnancy simply became the next chapter in the ever-changing image of an American icon.

As the mother of 3-year-old Lourdes, Rochester Hills' most famous native, has now thrust herself into an unconventional sort of parenthood *on screen*. Art imitates life in Paramount Pictures "The Next Best Thing," in which Madonna stars opposite Rupert Everett. Madonna's character, Abby, finds herself out of love but wanting to have a child. The drama unfolds when, after an unexpected and unintended night with her best friend Robert — who happens to be gay — Abby discovers she's pregnant. Though the situation initially seems far from ideal, they agree to raise their son, Sam (played by newcomer Malcolm Stumpf) together.

Directed by John Schlesinger, the drama opens with juxtaposed scenes of Abby instructing her serene yoga class and Robert working in sweltering heat to create a magnificent garden for an aging fashion designer named Ashby and his life partner. From the first shot, Schlesinger welcomes viewers into a dewy, golden-toned day in southern California. Abby's profession as a yoga instructor signifies spirituality, while Robert's work as a gardener rather obviously suggests fertility.

The peaceful weaving of these shots is disrupted when Abby returns home to find her boyfriend, Kevin (Michael Vartan), packing his belongings and leaving her for good. Kevin delivers the predictable "It's not you, its me" speech. Abby runs to Robert for comfort. As expected, he rescues her from her sadness — by humiliating Kevin and stirring quite a few martinis.

In a barrage of contrived moments, the film shows how these two friends come to spend one hazy, drunken New Year's Eve together as more than friends. Complete with the necessary fireworks. It's enough to have the audience rolling their eyes and grunting in shared disappointment. While Everett and Madonna's close friendship translates on screen, it doesn't develop into passion or urge the audience into pulling for the characters to come together. The plot uses an almost sitcom strategy, but Robert and Abby are no Ross and Rachel.

The film's title has multiple meanings: from choosing the next-best type of family, to finding the next, and the best love, to resolving the pain and anguish that results, the best way they can.

Threaded amid this story, the film deals with homosexuality as it is ignored or ridiculed by others, in a way that suggests just how unusual the circumstances surrounding Abby and Robert's family will become. The film finally takes a turn when Abby meets and falls in love with Ben (Benjamin Bratt), a businessman from New York. The relationship tears Robert and Sam apart, questioning with the true definition of a father and the underlying meaning of family.

Where the acting in "The Next Best Thing" falls short, director of photography Elliot Davis more than compensates with creative imagery and suggestive shots. Davis represents a feeling of entrapment when Robert sits in the horizontally lined shadows of his bedroom with the blinds drawn.

Ruth Myers costuming creates a convincing yoga instructor with Abby's free-flowing Indian-inspired wardrobe. She defines Ben by his razor-sharp suits. Every detail makes sense: from Abby's pink-hued vintage evening gown to the black-and-white designer gown she slips into at the Ashby mansion.

While the film isn't the finest work for these revered stars and filmmakers, it does raise some interesting issues. Is a family defined by blood relation? Can it be held together with love against the odds?

It's all a matter of seeking out "The Next Best Thing."

Ron Batzdorff

Little surprises: *Rupert Everett and Madonna star in "The Next Best Thing," a drama about one unconventional family. The film is already in area theaters.*

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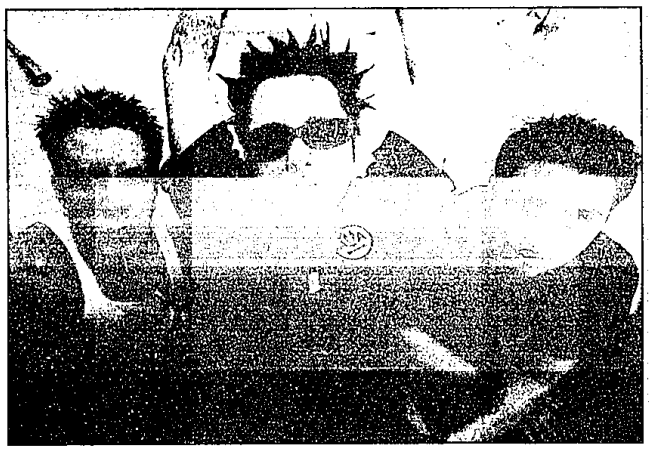

Staff photo by Gary Malerba

All 'Lit' up: *Ferndale's Rev will debut in Detroit as the opening act for Lit March 15 at St. Andrews Hall. Rev is (left to right) Charlie Grover, Todd Price and Mike Dolunt.*

By Stephanie Angelyn Casola
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■ Somehow the sound is so much bigger than the four walls holding it in. Detroit audiences will hear it resonate when Rev makes its metro area debut, opening for California's modern rockers, Lit, March 15 at Detroit's St. Andrews Hall.

Stepping slowly down the concrete steps and past the sound-absorbing curtain into the basement studio where Rev has begun hatching its own sound, a chill fills the air. It's not so much the location — an unassuming little house in Ferndale — as it is the feeling of something that's just beginning.

On the verge

Much like the Detroit music scene itself, Rev is a band on the verge, still gripping onto past successes while brimming in energy and ambition for the future. Drummer Charlie Grover, a former Waterford resident, rises fresh from the ashes of Sponge and shows he's back where he belongs behind his drum set. Vocalist and guitarist Todd Price, who bears some resemblance to Green Day's Billy Joe, straps on a Les Paul and steps over to a microphone. With his black hair pointed up in all directions, it doesn't seem to matter that there isn't a crowd in his basement. He's still set to play. Price and longtime friend Mike Dolunt — former members of Detroit's Plain — were just as ready for a change as Grover was when the trio first formed in late November, 1999.

With four clicks of the drumsticks, Rev starts its engines. Somehow the sound is so much bigger than the four walls holding it in. Detroit audiences will hear it resonate when Rev makes its metro area debut, opening for California's modern rockers, Lit, March 15 at Detroit's St. Andrews Hall. Lit may be best-known for their first radio hit "My Own Worst Enemy." "It's a great first show," said Price. "So far it's the best thing that's happened to us."

Grover said Sponge played a few shows with Lit. The gig resulted from that connection and a mutual friend. The drummer has no qualms about using his past success to give Rev a head start toward the future.

While who you know is important in the music business, it's truly songs like "Girls Don't Talk to Me," with its signature guitar-driven arrangements and addictive melodies that will catapult Rev into the public eye.

Just beginning

Still in its infancy, the band's got a host of material and continues to write, rehearse and collaborate. "We were all on the same page," said Grover, with a smile. "Everyone knew what we wanted to accomplish."

Rev is a totally collaborative project. The band mates not only live together, they bounce ideas off of each other and rehearse regularly. They name influences as diverse as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, to Social Distortion and Incubus.

Price, lead vocalist and guitarist, writes most of the lyrics because, he said, they "have to come, I think, from a central point of view. You have to write about what you know."

What they know for sure is the band needs to secure management and begin showcasing later this year. Rev also intends to release a CD, when the time comes. "There won't be any filler," said Dolunt with conviction. "We want an album you can listen to straight through."

There's a positive vibe reverberating through the house and beyond. "I have a good feeling about this project," said Grover. "I think the music will stand for itself."

See Rev debut with Lit, 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 15, St. Andrews Hall, Detroit. All ages. $15. (248) 645-6666 or www.ticketmaster.com.