

## Blue in the Face

**Rating:** ★★★★★ (out of ★★★★★)

**United States, 1995**

**U.S. Release Date:** 9/95-10/95 (limited)

**Running Length:** 1:25

**MPAA Classification:** R (Mature themes, nudity, profanity)

**Cast:** Harvey Keitel, Giancarlo Esposito, Jim Jarmusch, Lou Reed, Mel Gorham, Stephen Gevedon, Jose Zuniga, Victor Argo, Roseanne, Michael J. Fox

**Directors:** Wayne Wang and Paul Auster

**Producers:** Greg Johnson, Peter Newman, and Diana Phillips

**Scenarios developed by:** Wayne Wang, Paul Auster, and the actors

**Cinematography:** Adam Holender

**Music:** John Lurie

**U.S. Distributor:** Miramax Films

While filming *Smoke*, writer Paul Auster and director Wayne Wang became aware that there was a wealth of untapped potential in the secondary characters. So, after devising a number of thumbnail sketches for scenes, they approached Miramax to request funding for a second movie. The outcome is *Blue in the Face*, a low-budget companion piece to *Smoke* that was filmed in less than a week. *Blue in the Face* had no script and the direction by Auster and Wang was minimal. This resulted in an improvisational picture the likes of which is rarely seen in theaters. There is no plot to speak of -- just a series of disconnected vignettes. The directors gathered their actors together, started rolling the cameras, and told the men and women to talk until they were "blue in the face."

Though most of the characters and the settings for "Blue in the Face" appeared first in "Smoke," Wang insists that the film is not a sequel. Instead, the movie is a sort of improvisation on themes and ideas from the first film.

Shot in only six days in 1994, it came to life not as a script per se, but as a collection of rough notes Auster jotted down while in production on "Smoke." Working within these loose parameters, Wayne asked his actors—many of whom were also appearing in "Smoke"—to improvise 10-minute bits around their characters.

Out of the nine or 10 hours of footage they accumulated, Wang, Auster and editor Chris Tellefsen have managed to cull an unpredictable, occasionally amusing, wildly uneven portrait of a neighbourhood struggling to hold on to its identity. If the film has a centre, it is the pending closing of Auggie's shop.

But as with "Smoke," the movie's strength lies less in its story than in its performers. The picture mulls over a number of topics from Belgian waffles to the pleasures of taking that final drag on your last cigarette before you quit smoking. However, if "Smoke" came across as refreshingly limber and discursive, too much of "Blue in the Face" just seems to sit there. Some of the bits are a kick. For example, I loved the vignettes supplied by Lou Reed, who proposes a revolutionary approach to eye wear, and Michael J. Fox, who stops in briefly as an obvious nut case conducting his own survey of the human condition. (Sample question: "Is there anyone you hate enough to want dead?")

Those expecting something of the emotional and narrative depth of *Smoke* will be disappointed. *Blue in the Face* is an entirely different sort of film. From start to finish, it is pure experimental fun -- faux

cinema verite, philosophical ramblings, lengthy dialogue between characters, musical interludes, and video inserts. And, whereas *Smoke* was a drama, *Blue in the Face* is undeniably a comedy.

The central element of *Blue in the Face* -- the glue that holds everything together -- is an appreciation of Brooklyn. During the course of the film, we are exposed to the Brooklyn of the past, the Brooklyn of today, and an idealized Brooklyn that exists only in memories tinged by fondness and nostalgia. *Blue in the Face* explores the sense of community that makes this New York borough unique, and examines how the loss of the Dodgers created a vacuum that nothing has since filled. There's also a discourse on Belgian waffles, the "official" food of Brooklyn, which, as we learn, have little to do with any food actually served in Belgium.

The lack of continuity is one of *Blue in the Face's* charms. At the outset, Harvey Keitel comments, "I doubt any of this makes sense any more..." He is right, but it doesn't really matter. The film is so exuberant that we don't care whether we are listening to Lou Reed's off-the-cuff comments about New York, watching Mel Gorham do a sexy dance in front of a mirror, or hearing Jim Jarmusch's ramblings on the romance of the smoking culture. In every scene with every character, you can feel the spontaneity.

There are numerous cameos, most of which are successful. Lily Tomlin plays a man in search of Belgian waffles, Michael J. Fox is an oddball survey taker, Victor Argo strums the guitar, and RuPaul comes strolling by. Not all the guest shots add value, however. Madonna's brief turn as a singing telegram messenger is superfluous, and Roseanne displays an amazing lack of screen presence in her two scenes. To further highlight the TV star's lack of acting ability, she appears opposite Keitel, who is in top form.

Ignoring Roseanne, *Blue in the Face* has few missteps. Sure, it is a little raw, but polish is an undesirable quality in this kind of production. This film is designed simply to entertain -- a task it sets about in a most unconventional manner. With *Blue in the Face*, Auster and Wang may just be blowing smoke, but it's a colourful and aromatic concoction.

Adapted from <http://www.washingtonpost.com>

### Answer the following questions:

1. Which are the aspects of the film that make you understand that it was an "improvisational film"?
2. Why do you think both Wayne and Auster decided not to have a "real" plot, but a "series of vignettes" instead? How are these vignettes "disconnected" in your opinion?
3. Why is it considered an "experimental" film?
4. How would you conclude these statements "I doubt any of this makes sense any more..."; "Is there anyone you hate enough to want dead?"?
5. Some critics emphasise the spontaneity of most scenes. Do you agree?

6. **What are the aspects that some critics highlight as "weak" points in the film?**
7. **What aspects do you find in common between "Smoke" and "Blue in the face"?**
8. **Below you will read two posts from a blog (<http://joylandblog.wordpress.com/>). As you can easily notice, one is a positive "review", the other is negative. Write a review (as if it were a post to be published in the above-mentioned blog) in which you specify what you liked/didn't like about the film.**

### **A Disappointment Overall!**

Waynsie from Crawley , 17/02/2008 This film I became aware of by mistake. I'm a HUGE Madonna fan and whilst looking on her website I noticed she had a part in this film. I rented it to see her part only and had no idea what the film was about. In September 07 I went to New York for the first time on my honeymoon and fell in love with the place. As the film is set in New York it grabbed my attention even more. The film is not excellent but it is entertaining if you enjoy this style of movie. It's ingredients are real life New Yorkers being interviewed telling stories of events that have stayed in their minds in the Big Apple. These set the factual foundations of the movie and over the top of this setting comes the fictional story line. It focuses on a man's (Harvey K) everyday life in a diner, shop and neighbourhood. It has cameos by Roseanne Barr etc. The acting is poor in many places but the views of New York are great. The highlight of the film for me was Madonna's 3 minute cameo as a singing telegram right at the end of the film. Watch it if you like art house, documentary type films but avoid if you want an attention grabbing film with a good story line.

### **Clever comedy, Fantastic little film.**

Ani from Brighton , 16/02/2007 I absolutely loved this film, it was really refreshing to see something so different to anything I'd seen before, there really is no plot, just a series of very funny & sometimes moving scenes, it's mainly made up of people chatting about life in Brooklyn, interspersed with home video type clips of real people talking about life in Brooklyn. There are some classic laugh out loud moments in this film, the humour is very clever & could easily be misunderstood if observational comedy is not your thing, give it a try though, even if it's just to see Lou Reed who is hilarious.