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Anyone that has had to deal with a vicious snake of an apartment manager will appreciate the brilliant portrayal of the offensive Mr. Janney by Larry Cedar (Deadwood) in Nic Bettauer's wonderful film, DUCK. Cedar manages to perfectly convey a character with the dead, alcohol-rimmed eyes of a man with no soul or compassion who is probably unemployable in any other sector and who screams at the low income tenants in his down-and-out Los Angeles building as a way of exerting control. He is particularly vengeful toward an older tenant, Arthur, (Philip Baker Hall), a retired history professor who was a close friend of Janney's parents. Arthur's son (a boyhood friend of the loathsome manager) is deceased and Arthur's savings were decimated by the terminal illness of his wife.

Sad, lonely, and weary of the constant haranguing by Janney, Arthur is ready to finish off his bottles of prescription sleeping pills near a derelict urban pond that was a former favorite family spot when a tiny duckling, the only survivor of the attempt by his mother and siblings to cross a road, decides that Arthur is his new mother. Feeling needed, Arthur names the duck Joe and takes him back to his no-pets-allowed apartment. Joe soon grows into a healthy large duck – giving the pathetic Mr. Janney yet another reason to evict the old family friend.

Without savings or enough income to relocate, Arthur becomes one of the thousands of homeless people that populate the very rich city of Los Angeles. He and Joe start camping out near the pond – until city workers arrive to drain the pond to make way for yet another condo project. Arthur and Joe find themselves on Skid Row – which is no place for anyone, let alone a duck. Arthur decides that he will get Joe to the ocean. Along the way, a diverse collection of characters contributes to Arthur's life outlook. Some of them even help the duck.

Talented writer/producer/director Nic Bettauer is no quack. She filmed Duck in 18 days in Los Angeles and the film has been showing well and winning awards at international film festivals. She knows her subject well. She had the idea while attending USC graduate film school and working at a homeless shelter in the downtown core. Bettauer has continued to do volunteer work as a crisis counselor at the AIDS ward at Cedars Sinai Hospital and at the Los Angeles 24-hour Suicide Prevention Center. She knows that, contrary to the pronouncements of developers and politicians, that fate and circumstance often force people to the streets – not drugs, alcohol and laziness. Admittedly, there are many addicts on LA streets. But addiction, as evidenced by the countless re-hab centers available only to the city's wealthiest inhabitants, is not the sole domain of the homeless and low-income sector.

Bettauer could certainly have made a very good documentary about the homeless.

Instead, she hired some of the industry's finest character actors (including Third Rock from the Sun's French Stewart, Cedar, and Hall - whose impressive list of TV, film and theater credits is too long to list here), to put faces on the people that we ignore on a daily basis. Absolutely every performance in this film is so perfectly realized that Duck could be taught in acting schools. Director of Photography Anne Etheridge gives the viewer an inescapable vision of Los Angeles from the sidewalk up – from the cold street fire-lit inner city nights, to the tiny patches of nature that are rapidly disappearing, to the vibrant blue ocean beaches that provide a brief respite for the homeless. Duck is a visual feast for anyone that loves ALL of Los Angeles – not just the gentrified sections.

Nic Bettauer must be an optimist, for she infuses her engaging film with elements of hope and refuses to allow the protagonist, Arthur, to wallow in self-pity or vengeful bitterness. He does not blame the world for his misfortune. Rather, he finds purpose in caring for the whimsical duck, friendship among other street people and immigrants with whom he comes into contact, and forgiveness for misguided workers at shelters and agencies who are often only one paycheck away from being homeless themselves. Arthur's life does not miraculously become better, but he learns, along with the viewer, that a warm dry pair of socks can change a person's total outlook.

Bettauer, like other renowned storytellers Preston Sturges and John Steinbeck, asks viewers to look into their own hearts and attitudes about others of our own species. Duck manages to elucidate and entertain at the same time – something moviegoers won't get from Grindhouse. Duck will play in LA later this spring. The gritty reality, the simple story and brilliant acting will appeal to all ages.