



Richard Middleton

Thrills and Pills

THE opening shots zoom towards one tall building: the closing ones out from another. In between, *Side Effects* is like a complex ornamental clock. A few chimes are not struck convincingly but the clock is beautiful and keeps good time. Lots of surprises pop out.

Side Effects is exquisitely crafted. All its intricacies have been fitted into 106 minutes. It doesn't quite reach its full potential because of questionable casting and deficiencies in the plot – the film resembles the feature-length pilot of a police drama more closely than it should – but its production standards are much higher.

Rooney Mara (who bears a slight resemblance to Audrey Hepburn) leaves her fellow stars, Jude Law and Catherine Zeta Jones, far behind. Mara's understated style is ideal for the role of a woman who appears to be (and then finally is) a victim of prescription drugs.

For the perfect photography and lighting (out-of-focus greens and oranges in outdoor scenes, and creams and browns in gently lit but squarish, modern interiors) we can thank Soderbergh (alias 'Peter Andrews') himself.

The clock's mysteries can be revealed only once. Offering you a detailed examination of the plot would make watching *Side Effects* pointless. Promotional material made cinemagoers think that it's a conspiracy thriller about the amoral pharmaceutical industry. It isn't. When setting the scene, Soderbergh has plenty to say about 'Big pHARMA' and doctors but they get off lightly compared with Wall Street traders. This is a postmodern film, in which everything is questioned and no one is covered in glory.

Some of the background details are necessary. Self-obsessed, neurotic 'supporting' females move about like whining ventriloquists' dummies on wheels. Their lives are materially rich but spiritually empty; their relationships dysfunctional. These 'problems' have been medicalised, largely by the direct advertising of prescription drugs and word-of-mouth recommendation of the same. The women (and a few 'weak' men) are ripe for exploitation by drug companies and their (often unwitting) accomplices within medicine.

In its moralising mode, the film makes the points that: the prescription of antidepressants is a confidence trick; pharmaceutical industry executives don't care whether its products are safe or effective; the industry can use its considerable financial power to influence doctors; doctors often mean well but lack relevant or detailed knowledge and accept what colleagues and drug companies tell them too readily; information on adverse reactions is frequently suppressed by manufacturers; doctors feel they are too busy to find such information; contrary to appearances or popular belief, there are few checks on doctors' powers; in practice, a lot of psychiatry has no scientific basis; and patients, relatives, lawyers and judges often accept what doctors say, without question.



The last three points are essential elements of the plot towards the end. Dr Banks (Jude Law) is no saint but he is the hero. Far from feeling outraged at abuses of power, the audience is delighted. The desire of most people for retribution is much greater than their desire for truth.

Soderbergh's view of industrialised medicine is set in context by his comments on the fickle and cowardly nature of the urban managerial-professional class and the lack of love, lasting friendship and values within it. Among such people, typified by the partners in Dr Banks's practice and especially by his pushy (and unusually spelled) wife Dierdre (Vinessa Shaw), loyalty is to self and the supporting pillars of career, money and status. Other people don't matter.

Side Effects does not delve deeply into Soderbergh's pet subjects. Other expeditions have covered the territory. His main strategy here is to create a glassily quiet atmosphere, which can then be punctured by intense action. The silence may also be a comment on the isolation of a certain class of people from ordinary life in the humming city around them.

The contrast is particularly effective in two sequences. In one, Emily (Rooney Mara's character) seems to wobble on the edge of a New York Subway platform and is "rescued" by a Transit cop. The sudden rush of sound-where Hitchcock would have asked for dramatic music- jars the audience. This supposedly helps us to see things from her perspective. However, as the truth emerges, the tranquillity of much of the film seems slightly illogical. We realise that we have been shown things from the perspective of (ill-informed) psychiatry, rather than Emily's.

The other is the murder scene. Emily stuns audiences as much as her husband. This is a 'whydunnit', not a whodunnit. Jude Law takes the Columbo role but, whereas Columbo pretended to be a fool, Law's character really doesn't know what's going on, until well into the film when he suddenly stops bumbling and turns into a cross between Quincey, Lord Peter Wimsey and Gene Hunt.

It is at this point that the audience can be divided into the minority who are expecting it to turn into a neo-noir labyrinth, and the majority, who are less familiar with Soderbergh's recent works. The former category may be slightly disappointed, not least by Catherine Zeta Jones's cartoonish performance. She looks like a buttoned-up, feminist version of Diana Prince (Wonder Woman's *alter ego*) and sounds like Mae West with a cold. The latter group will be as thrilled by all the twists and turns as a five-year old is by a ghost-train ride.

There are several plot incongruities and the sex scenes are embarrassingly clumsy. Nevertheless, *Side Effects* is one of Hollywood's best recent efforts. The film is over-engineered and editing of the plot is careless, but it still has a lot to recommend it. As the little man in the mac used to say, there's just one more thing. When you've seen it, don't spoil it for those who haven't.
