

“All the News
That’s Fit to Print”

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Southern California: Sunny to partly cloudy most places. Highs from the 70’s along the coast, 80’s interior, low 90’s deserts. Weather map and forecasts for other areas are on page C21.

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ONE DOLLAR

60's Payola as a First Taste of America

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

It wasn't that long ago that the notion of Kevin Bacon, the clean-cut, all-American star of "Footloose," portraying a sleazy early-60's Cleveland disk jockey, would have seemed utterly incongruous. But this gifted young character actor with his chiseled, vulpine features and sneaky, too-easy grin has proved himself a master impersonator of smoothies and shifty-eyed hustlers. In "Telling Lies in America," Mr. Bacon's role as Billy Magic, a hepcat Top 40 disk jockey eluding payola investigators as he bounces from city to city, is one of the juiciest of his career. When Billy isn't snapping his fingers and jive-talking in a hybrid lingo of Wolfman Jack and Alan Freed inside the cramped studios of radio station WHK, he is gliding around Cleveland in a bright red Cadillac convertible, promoting sock hops and smirking like a lowlife cock of the walk.

"Telling Lies in America," directed by Guy Ferland from a screenplay by Joe Eszterhas (the same top-dollar screenwriter who gave us "Basic Instinct" and "Showgirls"), is the story of Billy's affectionate but corrupt mentoring of Karchy Jonas (Brad Renfro), a Hungarian-born teen-ager who recently immigrated to the United States with his father and is awaiting naturalization. A high-school pariah who is picked on for his foreignness and overall lack of cool, Karchy lands a high-paying job as Billy's studio assistant after the disk jockey recognizes him as a kindred tainted soul. Desperate for status, Karchy has forged the signatures of a bunch of his fellow students on postcards mailed to Billy as part of a contest naming a local student to the "High School Hall of Fame." Even though the forgeries are obvious, Karchy refuses to admit to them, which in Billy's eyes makes the boy an ideally malleable and mendacious assistant. At the same time, Billy dazzles Karchy by introducing him to filet mignon, letting him drive his car, buying him a prostitute so he can lose his virginity, and paying him what seems like a princely salary of \$100 a week.

The movie, which the New York Film Festival is showing today and Saturday at Alice Tully Hall, proves that Mr. Eszterhas still possesses sharp dramatic instincts despite such creative debacles as "Jade" and "Showgirls." In the semi-autobiographical story, which borrows elements from "America, America" and "Quiz Show," Mr. Eszterhas



Banner Entertainment

Kevin Bacon plays a 60's disk jockey in "Telling Lies in America."

looks back on his Hungarian immigrant youth in Cleveland. The movie is loaded with heart and the feel for local color and period detail that can only come out of a personal reminiscence.

"Telling Lies in America" starts out small, then widens as it goes along. In the saddest of its early vignettes, Karchy wins his first date with Diney Majeski (Calista Flockhart), his co-worker in a poultry and egg shop, and laces her milkshake with Spanish fly that a classmate has provided. Instead of turning Diney into an insatiable sex fiend, it produces excruciating cramps and makes her sick to her stomach. This incident is one of several pathetically ill-advised pranks pulled by Karchy that nearly get him expelled from his

Roman Catholic boys' school.

As the moral concerns of the film widen to embrace the early 60's payola scandals and their potentially disastrous impact on Karchy's and his father's dreams of American citizenship, the movie sacrifices some of its acute care for nuance. But it never fumbles its big theme: a morally flexible inquiry into the relationship of truth and lies to success in America. Unlike "Quiz Show," which is set roughly in the same period, it makes a case for selective dishonesty, for choosing which lies are worth telling in order to protect more important issues, and which are not.

If the movie belongs to Mr. Bacon, it has some striking supporting performances. Mr. Renfro is a bit too vocally polished for the role of an immigrant teen-ager who spends hours trying to teach himself to say "the" instead of "da," but he makes Karchy's increasing sophistication and developing sense of morality entirely credible. Ms. Flockhart brings a dark-eyed gravity and intelligence to the role of Diney.

In addition to an evocative early-60's rock-and-roll soundtrack, the movie features a terrific old-style rhythm-and-blues number, "Medium Rare," written by Mr. Bacon and performed by one of Karchy's black classmates (Damon Fletcher) and his group.

TELLING LIES IN AMERICA

Directed by Guy Ferland; written by Joe Eszterhas; director of photography, Reynaldo Villalobos; edited by Jill Savitt; produced by Ben Myron and Fran Rubel Kazui; released by Banner Pictures. Shown tonight at and Saturday at the Alice Tully Hall, as part of the 35th New York Film Festival. Running time: 101 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Kevin Bacon (Billy Magic), Brad Renfro (Karchy Jonas), Maximilian Schell (Dr. Istvan Jonas), Calista Flockhart (Diney Majeski), Paul Dooley (Father Norton) and Jonathan Rhys Meyers (Kevin Boyle).