

# Review/Film: *Six Degrees of Separation*; John Guare's 'Six Degrees,' on Art And Life Stories, Real and Fake

**Six Degrees of Separation** Directed by Fred Schepisi | Comedy, Drama, Mystery | R | 1h 52m

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The Fifth Avenue apartment where much of "Six Degrees of Separation" unfolds is filled with expensive artifacts, most notably Flan and Ouisa Kittredge themselves. Flan (Donald Sutherland) and Ouisa (Stockard Channing), a self-important art dealer and the wife he describes as "a Dada manifesto," live all too comfortably within this sanctuary. The Kittredges are serenely unaware that their lives can be rearranged by a single uninvited guest, one who manages to tap into their fears, desires and hilariously fatuous daydreams. Neither Flan nor Ouisa might have suspected, before this story begins, that they could yearn so desperately for the respect of their own children, or hope to be extras in a movie version of "Cats."

The visitor is Paul (Will Smith), the cunning, too-good-to-be-true impostor whose exploits are derived from a real news story. Paul has done enough homework to know how perfectly a fake connection to Sidney Poitier will sway uneasy white socialites, people who may be self-styled liberals but can still address a friend as "You darling old poop."

It is Paul's visit that prompts Ouisa to muse about the title phrase, which in John Guare's play (and now his screenplay) presents destiny as a kind of mathematical puzzle. Chance meetings with exactly the right people can permanently alter unexamined lives.

A seventh degree of separation, and the one that matters most here, is the gap between stage and screen. It has been bridged very aggressively by the director Fred Schepisi, whose frenetic and literal-minded approach to this material takes getting used to. Onstage, directed by Jerry Zaks with a backdrop of only two sofas and a fake Kandinsky, "Six Degrees of Separation" had a quick, precise comic style that left a great deal to the imagination. Much of the play's hilarity came from its lightning-fast juxtapositions, and the dizzying ways in which they allowed the story to escalate. The film moves just as speedily, but it's much more cluttered. In the presence of so much extra baggage, the screwball timing takes on a frantic edge.

However, Mr. Schepisi's directorial vigor wins out over his film's skittishness. This version may horrify purists, but it winds up working entertainingly on its own broader, flashier terms. Seldom has a play been opened up this spiritedly, with a crowd of onlookers to hear

Flan and Ouisa's titillating story (a role once played by the theater audience), a number of well-chosen New York locations and an array of people and paintings to flesh out Mr. Guare's social satire. The film uses its extras as skillfully as it uses a mock Kandinsky, which is prominently featured. It seems appropriate that the film's real and phony artworks are casually intermingled.

Despite its busier style, the film is very faithful to Mr. Guare's story, with Stockard Channing in a reprise of her fine performance as its hilariously brittle heroine. Equally deft is Donald Sutherland, who turns Flan's fatuousness into a great comic asset. (When Paul delivers a speech that he claims is part of a thesis that has been stolen from him, Flan says solemnly, "I hope your muggers read every word!") Also amusing are Mary Beth Hurt and Bruce Davison as two more Upper East Side types who have been seduced by Paul and bitten by the "Cats" bug. "My son has no involvement with any black frauds!" Ms. Hurt declares indignantly, upon learning that Paul's trickery also involves her child.

The story's college-age characters are also funny, especially Jeffrey Abrams (the screenwriter of "Regarding Henry") as the wildly outraged son of a divorced doctor (Richard Masur). And there is an amusingly sardonic turn by Ian McKellen as a visiting South African who happens to witness Paul's night at the Kittredges'. ("Your father means a great deal in South Africa," he informs Paul.) The film's only casting misstep comes with Mr. Smith, who plays Paul as a smooth, pleasant interloper without the hints of mockery or desperation that should accompany his deception. Mr. Smith recites his lines plausibly without bringing great passion to the role.

As "Six Degrees of Separation" ricochets about town (and to Cambridge, Mass., where these mink-draped matrons travel indignantly to question their surly children), it has great fun defining the habitat of its privileged characters. "Are these all rich people?" Paul asks Trent (Anthony Michael Hall), the gay man who helps to coach him about the Kittredges and their circle. "No," Trent answers definitively. "Hand to mouth on a higher plateau."

Patrizia von Brandenstein's production design is witty and ambitious in establishing the proper ambiance. And Ian Baker's cinematography gives the film a mischievously sophisticated look. Also helpful are the authentic extras who fill out the party scenes (Kitty Carlisle Hart plays one hostess) and look properly aghast over the Kittredges' ordeal. Less imaginative are the side trips to every minor setting (the Strand Bookstore, the Rainbow Room, a skating rink) that figures even faintly in this story.

Six Degrees of Separation Directed by Fred Schepisi; written by John Guare, based on his play; director of photography, Ian Baker; edited by Peter Honess; music by Jerry Goldsmith; production designer, Patrizia von Brandenstein; produced by Mr. Schepisi and

Arnon Milchan; released by MGM. Baronet, Third Avenue at 59th Street. Running time: 102 minutes. This film is rated R. Ouisa . . . Stockard Channing Paul . . . Will Smith Flan . . . Donald Sutherland Geoffrey . . . Ian McKellen Kitty . . . Mary Beth Hurt