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Movie Reviews, Columns & Top 10 Lists by TC Candler, Richard Propes & Jacob Hall

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**IC**

## EVE OF UNDERSTANDING

**IC**

"The Healing Journey Is Never This Black And White"



Directed by Alyson Shelton - Written by Alyson Shelton  
 Starring Rebecca Lowman, Susan Roberts, Jennifer Harlow, Mark Reeb  
 Distribution Independent - 2006 - 90mins - Rated R



### Richard Propes' Review

★★★★☆

A-

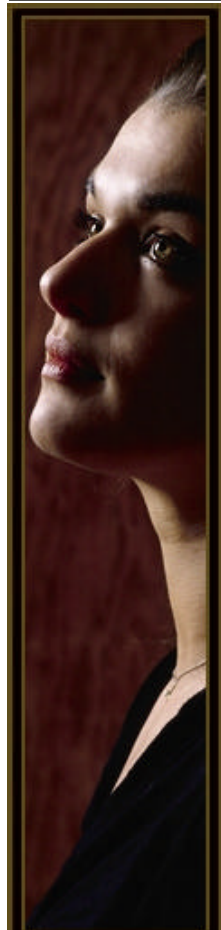
Even in death Eve can't calm the storm caused by secrets and lies...

I remember the phone call like it was yesterday. It wasn't yesterday, though. In fact, it has been several years. It was just one day in what has been a long healing journey from childhood sexual abuse, insecurities, doubts, personal failures, losses, suicide attempts and other methods of self-destruction.

This one day, I called my mother from a pay phone in a Value City Department Store and asked her the question I had needed answered for years..."Are you sorry I was born?"

With "Eve of Understanding," writer/director/producer Alyson Shelton has crafted a film of uncommon wisdom,

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authentic dialogue, simple humanity and, most importantly, a film that captures eloquently the often delicate balance between humiliation and exhilaration that life's journey often affords us.

Over the next three months, Hollywood will be inundating us with a slew of big budget, slickly produced and beautiful to look at films. Some of these films will achieve magnificent box office receipts...still others of these films will be critically praised and recognized with Golden Globes and Academy Awards and possibly even Independent Spirit Awards. Some of them, the minority undoubtedly, will even be worthy of such accolades. Yet, when our film professors and acting coaches and theatre directors teach our next generation of actors, writers and directors it is films such as "Eve of Understanding" that they should use as shining examples of film-making in its truest and purest form.

You can give Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg or Clint Eastwood a budget of \$20 million, \$30 million, \$50 million or more and they will make you a film that will entertain, inspire, educate, enchant and leave you skipping out of the movie theatre happy and satisfied. Give them \$20,000? They could do no better job than Alyson Shelton has done in her feature film writing and directing debut.

"Eve of Understanding" is part road film, part dysfunctional family film, part child abuse/domestic violence film, and part love story. We are introduced to Donna (Rebecca Lowman), a chain-smoking, recovering alcoholic with an abusive boyfriend (Mark Reeb) whose mother has just died. While her sister, Lisa (Jennifer Harlow), inherits everything of actual worth Donna finds herself left with a journey to deliver tokens to a variety of people from her mother's life and, finally, to spread her mother's ashes in Sedona.

Though Donna initially journeys without hesitation, she quickly finds that the closure her mother is offering these individuals is, in fact, tearing open her own unhealed wounds from a lifetime of secrets, lies, hurts and deceptions. Each individual, it seems, triggers an old response, a bad coping skill, a willingness to hurt herself once again.

There is a scene very early in Donna's journey where we see Donna sitting in her 1988 Honda Civic with her mother's ashes in a coffee can beside her. Donna, as she nears her first stop, is anxious, fearful and chain-smoking. Repeatedly, she is putting out her cigarettes on the lid to the coffee can. There's perhaps no more powerful a visual image that I've seen in a film this year than this simple, emotional and revealing image.

The items that Donna is delivering are letters, cards, small objects and, at times, final putdowns and long-held resentments. Along the way, Donna first succumbs to her

old cycle of victimization before, after a relapse and repeated personal failures, finally reaching out again to everyone she has encountered along her journey in simple, poignant gestures of reconciliation.

In such a journey film, there can easily develop a sense of repetition. Shelton wisely varies the intensity, energy and emotional investments required from person to person for Donna. Along the way, she encounters an old boyfriend (Tim Wrobel), an evangelical aunt (Kit Gwin), an abusive father (Henry Kana), an eerily loving brother (Daniel Magill) and the mysterious Mary (Shaeri Richards).

"Eve of Understanding" is blessed with a tremendously gifted ensemble cast, however, this cast is clearly and wondrously led by the sensitive, heartfelt and inspired performance of Rebecca Lowman as Donna. Lowman's Donna is inspiring because she is so richly, authentically human. She starts out as a victim, but she is never completely a victim. She is convincingly hopeless and hopeful, wounded but loving, jaded but loyal and seemingly damaged but, oh so preciously innocent. She is sweet, funny, scary, sexy, playful and frightened all in one. Lowman's performance, if there is any justice, will be recognized with an Independent Spirit nomination. She's already been recognized at multiple film festivals, including last week's Boston Film Festival.

Lowman's efforts are undoubtedly aided by the strong supporting cast. In particular, Jennifer Harlow shines as Donna's ever-praying sister, while Kit Gwin is almost frightening as the evangelical Aunt Ruth. Daniel Magill is spot-on perfect "loving" brother, and Bellamy Young, as Cassie, beautifully portrays different sides of that same healing coin. Among the child actors, Jenna Craig is hilariously adorable as a young niece who asks a question only a child would have the sense and courage to ask.

As Donna's abusive boyfriend, Mark Reeb falls short in a scene that feels both underdeveloped and lacks the emotional authenticity and chemistry of the other scenes in the film. While the "words" he speaks are fine, the scene itself feels forced and Reeb doesn't quite capture the emotional dance that is often played out in relationships with domestic abuse.

The same abruptness somewhat hinders the closing scene between Donna and Mary. While Shaeri Richards is a tad more convincing as a woman with a huge secret for Donna, the revelation is so abrupt that it ultimately feels slightly forced. The scene concludes itself well and, ultimately, provides a peaceful, appropriate closing for the film itself.

"Eve of Understanding" is shot on Mini-DV, and production design is astonishingly strong throughout the film. Elizabeth Santoro's cinematography beautifully balances visual images with spoken dialogue, and scenes shot in

Sedona are nothing short of beautiful. Peter Senchuk's score and Brenda Hinesley's costuming also perfectly complement the film and its characters.

I remember the phone call like it was yesterday. I remember talking and crying and asking and feeling the kind of feeling that is half primal scream and half whirlwind of wonder. I remember going home, writing, calling friends, writing some more and, a few months later, taking all of those feelings, thoughts, ideas and ramblings and putting them into a book of poetry and a one-man show where I owned every damn word of it.

"Eve of Understanding" is poetry for the soul that may frighten, may inspire, may heal and, yes, may tear the scabs off of old wounds. Alyson Shelton's "Eve of Understanding" is a compassionate reminder that life is a journey, we are not always as alone as we feel, there is hope and we are all here to give and receive understanding to each other. It is not a film that survivors of child abuse or domestic violence should see alone, because it may very well trigger memories and, ultimately, it is a reminder that we need not travel this journey all alone.

There are films that achieve greatness, win awards, make millions of dollars and are just plain entertaining.

Then, there are films that build bridges, change lives, heal, embrace and understand. These are the films I love the most.

I can say it no simpler. I loved "Eve of Understanding."

© Written by Richard Propes - [Email Me!](#)

#### **How We Rated This Film**

[TC Candler](#) -

[Richard Propes](#) - ★★★★★ **A-**

[Jacob Hall](#) -

#### **TC Candler's Comment**

n/a

#### **Jacob Hall's Comment**

n/a



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