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Their Generation

New traditions in American independent filmmaking.

BY [RICHARD BRODY](#)



The cinematographer Sean Price Williams films Kentucker Audley in Charles Poekel's film "Christmas, Again."

CREDIT COURTESY CHARLES POEKEL

While showcasing fresh talent from around the world, this year's edition of the "New Directors/New Films" series (held jointly at Film Society of Lincoln Center and MOMA, March 18-29) also spotlights major trends in American independent filmmaking.

Charles Poekel's first feature, "**Christmas, Again**" (March 24 and March 28), is the kind of unflinching yet tender New York sidewalk story that risks becoming a cliché of downbeat naturalism. It's about a lonely young man—too aptly named Noel—who gets drawn into sentimental adventures while selling Christmas trees on the frigid streets of Greenpoint. Yet Poekel skirts this risk, and creates a minor marvel of quasi-documentary discovery, by way of a method that is at the core of contemporary independent filmmaking—bringing together a cast and crew of young independent-film regulars.

Noel is played by Kentucker Audley, a director as well as an actor (Amy Seimetz's "Sun Don't Shine"). Lydia, a young woman whom Noel shelters in his trailer, is played by Hannah Gross, who, at twenty-two, has already acted in films by Matt Porterfield, Nathan Silver, and Dustin

Guy Defa. Poekel's crew is headed by the cinematographer Sean Price Williams and the editor Robert Greene (the director of "Actress"), who have worked on some of the best recent independent films, including "Listen Up Philip."

Poekel's cast and crew are, in effect, a movie-in-a-box—just add a director and an idea—and they realize Poekel's sense of lived-in, firsthand experience. The actors deliver alert, relaxed performances devoid of theatrical flourishes. Williams's handheld camera work is attuned to their slightest gestures, and Greene's abrupt association of images suggests leaps of memory and imagination. The film's tone is instantly recognizable as a sort of modernist classicism, even as it reflects the director's subtle, spontaneous moods.

The director Rick Alverson gives the age-old trope of the unfunny comedian an extreme new twist in "**Entertainment**" (March 29). Gregg Turkington, who performs under the name Neil Hamburger, here adopts that persona for the Comedian, an awkward, hangdog standup whose wheezy riffs tend toward the embarrassingly inappropriate. Booked in depressing venues (his first show is in a prison), he responds to hecklers with ugly sexual invective that makes Don Rickles seem like Mister Rogers.

Alverson films the Comedian's lonely tour in the California desert with poised widescreen images that lend his grubby wanderings the mythic grandeur of a classic Western. The film is both jagged and suave, like an orchestrated concept album by a garage band. The cast—including John C. Reilly, as the Comedian's prosperous cousin (who advises him to cut the references to semen), Michael Cera, Dean Stockwell, Seimetz, and Defa—completes Alverson's full-circle union of underground exotica and Hollywood legend. ♦

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