

# VARIETY

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## JULIAN PO

A Cypress Films production, released by Fine Line Features. Produced by Jon Glascoe, Joseph Pierson. Executive producers, Alan Mindel, Denise Shaw.

Directed by Alan Wade. Screenplay, Alan Wade. Camera (Duart color), Bernd Heint; editor, Jeffrey Wolf; music, Patrick Williams; production designer, Stephen McCabe; costume designer, Juliet Polcsa; sound (Dolby Digital), Scott Breindel; supervising sound editor, Stuart Levy; assistant director, Jim LaClair; casting, Todd Thaler. Reviewed at the Deauville Film Festival, Deauville, France, Sept. 10, 1997. Running time: 84 MIN.

Julian Po.....Christian Slater  
Sarah..... Robin Tunney  
Vern..... Michael Parks  
Lucy..... Cherry Jones  
Lilah Leech..... Allison Janney  
Sheriff Leon ..... Frankie Faison  
Darlene .....LaTanya Richardson  
Mayor Leech .....Harve Presnell

September 1997

By L. N.

An engagingly off-kilter exploration of how a suicidal book-keeper becomes a make-shift messiah, "Julian Po" is a beautifully controlled fable whose profound underpinnings are buoyed by luminous comic timing. Scripter-helmer Alan Wade's debut is a commercial zero but is certain to stick in the minds of those who see it; peculiar yet endearing pic marks the filmmaker as a talent to watch.

Wade adapted and expanded a 40 page novella by Yugoslavian author Branimir Scepanovic adding characters, compressing time and trading Montenegro for the Catskills, all to excellent effect. Story has face value charm to spare, but also slyly comments on the cult of celebrity, the perils of inertia vs. the impetus to action and the ways in which the meaning and personal identity can crystallize where least expected.

Having recently purchased a cheap tape recorder that he uses for an audio diary (which serves as V.O. narration), 30-year old title character (Christian Slater) is a fairly anonymous, nondescript fellow who is on a journey to see the sea for the first time when his car breaks down. Po ambles into a tiny, old fashioned town off the beaten track, checks into the only hotel and immediately becomes the focus of every citizen's rabid curiosity. The wholesome but eerie locale has rarely, if ever hosted a stranger, and the residents are naturally suspicious.

Convinced that he is up to no good, the townspeople demand that the visitor reveal his intentions. Under pressure, Po blurts out that he plans to kill himself. This admission touches a collective nerve: Impressed by their guest's courage and starved for entertainment, the gawking locals follow his every move. Po finds himself the recipient of constant kindness - and confessions.

Cornered into uttering inspiring platitudes, he becomes a catalyst for all sorts of personal momentum.

The sheriff, the barber, the haberdasher, a garage mechanic -- even an elderly woman who sells lottery tickets to folks who want to bet on which day Po will off himself -- find their lives transformed. The town pastor undergoes a particularly amusing change of heart after interacting with Po. But problems emerge when, having raised local expectations Po stays on yet takes no concrete steps toward doing himself in.

Slater put on weight -- and a mustache -- for the role, details that help impart a likable vulnerability to the frequently exasperated Po.

Pithy character roles abound, including Harve Presnell as the mayor and Alison Janney as his wife, Michael Parks as the innkeeper, Robin Tunney as an angelic woman who throws herself at Po and Cherry Jones as a deaf-mute chamber maid.

Costumes and setting have an appealingly timeless quality, although tale is contemporary. Saturated colors in exteriors and a lovely score [by Patrick Williams] with Gershwin-like overtones contribute to pic's special atmosphere.