

Dental work

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

Dave Hurst is a dentist who shares a practice with his wife, Dana, and comes home at night to their three little girls. He feels he does the lion's share of the household duties: his domestic skills are more finely honed, and the tantrum-prone youngest child doesn't like to be touched by anyone but Daddy.

Sharing both home and work space with Dana, Dave naturally assumes that she keeps no secrets from him. But she lands in the chorus of a local opera, and when he comes backstage unexpectedly he sees her, from a distance, looking with unmistakable ardor at another man. Then her chronic lateness for meals and other unexplained absences begin to add up in a new way.

The Secret Lives of Dentists is a wry, prickly portrait of a marriage in crisis, told from the point of view of the husband thrown for a loop by his wife's apparent infidelity. The movie is remarkably evenhanded, equally sympathetic to both partners.

The director, Alan Rudolph, made a pair of terrific comedies, *Choose Me* and *Songwriter*, in the mid-'80s. Since then his stock in trade has been movies like *Trouble in Mind* and *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* that are puffed up on temperament and present their quirkiness as a badge of honor. Here, though, working from an ingenious script by playwright Craig Lucas (whose most famous play is the AIDS fable *Prelude to a Kiss*), he puts his style in the service of a well-crafted story told in a bemused, family-man-in-Wonderland tone. You don't see any of Rudolph's usual excesses.

Rudolph's visual invention and lightly ironic blackout-sketch style temper the most indulgent patches of Lucas's writing--Dave's fantasies and inner monologues. So does the intimate treatment of family life. The film is as much about parenting as it is about marriage. It depicts a delicate balance of patience and explosion, indulgence and indignation, amusement and exasperation in a confined setting. You often feel like an eavesdropper.

The emotional centerpiece of the picture is a segment in which Dave (Campbell Scott) comes home with a case of the flu that works its way through the family over five long days. The Hursts have been through it before: Dana (Hope Davis), with her gift for precision, predicts exactly how long the siege will last. With the resignation of battle-scarred vets, she and Dave negotiate the nursing, feeding, consoling and vigilant watching. This is perhaps the most acutely observed family comedy-drama since the scenes built around Diane Keaton and Albert Finney and their four daughters in the great 1982 *Shoot the Moon*.

Scott and Davis display a rare combination of technique and emotional authenticity. Most of their work has been in short-lived indie pictures. The simultaneous release of *American Splendor*, in which Davis plays the wife of cartoonist Harvey Pekar, provides a serendipitous showcase for her versatility. Scott has never found a better vehicle for the lightning shifts in nuance that have always distinguished his acting. He's a cerebral actor; he thinks rather than feels his way through his characters. Much of *Secret Lives* takes place in his consciousness as he struggles with the panoply of feelings this new twist in his married life calls up.

The movie gives Dave an alter ego: one of his patients is a rude, quarrelsome musician named Slater (Denis Leary) who, having lost a filling Dave gave him, embarrasses him in public. In Dave's imagination, Slater begins to personify his more brutal, instinctual side, the side he isn't accustomed to giving vent to-his "secret life." (Leary is hilarious.)

Secret Lives isn't remotely like any other arthouse movie out there; it has the sensibility of a classic comic short story. (Its roots are, in fact, literary: Lucas adapted a Jane Smiley novella called *The Age of Grief*.) And it's one of the few recent movies that reflects the way a recognizable man and woman handle a rent in the comfortable fabric of their lives.