

'The Professional' focuses on relationship, not action, to entertain

Dylan Alford
For the Oregon Daily Emerald

Great story. Great acting. Great action. This is what *The Professional*, director Luc Besson's follow up to *La Femme Nikita*, has to offer. Besson uses creative camera angles and an intriguing musical score to create some of the most amazing action sequences in film. However, the action is not the key to the greatness of *The Professional*.

The focus on the bond between two people, complemented by the extremely well-directed action scenes, makes this an amazingly intelligent action film. Although the film is very violent at times, it is so well-

The Professional

Jean Reno, Gary Oldman and Natalie Portman
Director: Luc Besson
Rated: R

★★★★★

balanced by the tenderness of the moments between the two stars that the violence almost becomes secondary.

Jean Reno, who also starred for Besson in *La Femme Nikita* and *Subway*, plays a professional hitman named Leon who saves a 12-year-old girl from being executed by dirty federal drug agents. Reno creates a

character full of ironies, and brings a human side to a character type that is traditionally one dimensional.

Although he may be a professional murderer he is also a soft-spoken, trustworthy, likeable man. Most killers are portrayed as hardened tough guys who completely shut themselves off to any emotion. Not Leon.

Even though letting Matilda (Natalie Portman) into his life goes against his better judgement, he can't help feeling a bond to her.

This bond is the focal point of the film and Portman plays her role to perfection. From the moment she appears on screen, she is absolutely captivating. She gives Matilda so much more

depth than the average 12-year-old female character that at times she seems to be much older than that.

Matilda is tough, sensitive, passionate, stoic, irrational and logical all at the same time. She elicits sympathy from the audience at one turn and almost makes them cheer at the next.

For example, early in the film she breaks your heart as she sits, nose bleeding because her father hit her, and asks Leon, "Is life always this hard or just when you're a kid?" Later in the film she puts it all back together again as she demonstrates amazing courage in the face of a very frightening man.

That man is federal drug

agent Gary Stansfield, played by Gary Oldman. Stansfield asks Matilda if she loves life. She answers that she does, to which he responds, "Good. That's good. I wouldn't enjoy taking the life of someone who didn't enjoy it."

Oldman's performance is astounding. He makes Stansfield a despicable character almost right from the beginning. His complete disregard for human life and indiscriminate killing create a stark contrast to Leon's credo of "No women, no kids." Stansfield will basically kill anything that moves after he pops one of his pills and starts hearing Beethoven's overtures in his head.

Luc Besson's movie a riveting and intelligent thriller

(AP) - There's a scene in Luc Besson's new English-language film, *The Professional*, in which a wigged-out DEA agent tells a 12-year-old girl how much pleasure he will derive in killing her.

It's an incredible piece of filmmaking, not so much because of the sheer terror experienced by a child at the hands of a maniac, but because this very child has come — armed to the teeth — to kill the agent.

The child, played with exquisite precision and honesty by newcomer Natalie Portman, is the center of this engrossing story about a hitman and his young protegee.

The Professional is one of the most intelligent and riveting thrillers to emerge in years. It involves more than car chases, high-tech weapons, martial arts and explosives, focusing on the human condition and what bonds one individual to another.

The amazing Jean Reno, who starred for Besson in the French-language *La Femme Nikita* and *Subway*, portrays Leon, a professional hitman who lives an austere existence without friends, comfort or any pleasures outside of milk and movie musicals.

He's a quiet and haunted man whose credo is "no women, no children" — he will kill only men. His one companion is a scraggly plant he loves more than any-

thing in the world — until his 12-year-old neighbor comes into his life.

An abused child, her parents, sister and baby brother are rubbed out in a drug hit by corrupt federal drug agents, led by Gary Stansfield (Gary Oldman), a pill-popping lunatic who likes to kill to Mozart.

Leon takes her in, realizing her life might be in danger. But she has plans beyond just being in a safe house: She wants Leon to teach her how to become a professional hitwoman.

Their is a strange, but endearing bond. And despite Natalie's charming sensuality, there are no sexual overtones. She is a child in love with an older and dangerous man, but it is not carnal and he shows no sexual interest in her. There is much she can learn from him and much he learns from her and, against his better judgment, his emotions are stirred.

Natalie sets out to avenge her family and she gets a little help from her mentor. It all crashes together in an explosive and frightening climax.

Besson is an actor's director, and uses his camera to supplement what his actors do. His camera is never still and he enhances each mood, each sequence, with inventive angles and shots.

Reno, with his hawk-like face

and gawky moves, is wonderful as Leon. He's mysterious, fast, menacing, sad, tortured. His moments with the girl are tender.

Natalie Portman is an actress to watch. She gives an Oscar-worthy performance as the saucy, streetwise and seductive innocent caught in the reality of death.

Oldman, who has emerged as an outstanding character actor in recent years, is somewhat over the top with his manic rants and twisting head as he snaps down on his drug capsules. But he remains a compelling screen presence.

The always-sturdy Danny Aiello lends good support as Tony, the contract broker who looks after Leon.

Unlike most Hollywood filmmakers who insist on looping noisy, banal and intrusive canned music over their action sequences, Besson has the creative talents of Eric Serra, whose score breathes tension and intrigue. There's also a nice lightness to it. Serra also scored *La Femme Nikita* and *The Big Blue*, among other films.

The Professional is a Columbia Pictures release produced by Patrice Ledoux, who has produced all of Besson's recent films. It is rated R for graphic violence.

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