

# 'Ghost Dog' a complex flick

■ The samurai film offers great acting by Forest Whitaker and masterful directing from indie auteur Jim Jarmusch

By Eric Pfeiffer  
Oregon Daily Emerald

Slide into your movie seat and focus on the moment.

Ghost Dog is your 90-minute retainer. After you've watched the events of this film unfold, contemplate the interwoven complexities of the empty popcorn bucket and relax as your mind anticipates the soothing simplicity of your 9 a.m. physics midterm.

Sound ridiculous, intriguing or perhaps both?

The critically-acclaimed new film, starring Forest Whitaker, directed by Jim Jarmusch and with a powerful soundtrack from RZA, takes viewers on a multi-layered journey, exploring topics ranging from spirituality to the cultural significance of hip-hop music.

The movie plot sounds something like an old B-movie samurai flick from the 1960s. And it is, plus countless other elements all at once.

Whitaker plays Ghost Dog, a samurai in modern-day Detroit, with a life-debt to his retainer Louie (John Tormey). Twelve years earlier, Louie saved Ghost Dog's life from a gang of street thugs. Shortly thereafter, he appears at Louie's doorstep, offering his unique services. Whenever Louie, or someone from his "family" needs to make a hit on a local thug, he can call in Ghost Dog to take care of business.

Not by cell-phone or pager, but by pigeon.

Ghost Dog lives alone, in a tiny shack, on the roof of an apartment building in downtown Detroit.

His possessions are of only the most basic necessity: a bed, pigeon food and a CD player to listen to his favorite rap music.

Using one of several dozen carrier pigeons to communicate with Louie on a daily basis, Ghost Dog sends and receives instructions for his next assignment.

Things have gone this way for more than 10 years, until a moment of chance alters Ghost Dog's life and sets the movie's plot into motion.

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While performing his most recent hit on a relative of the family, Ghost Dog leaves behind a young woman at the scene. She wasn't supposed to be there, so he feels no reason to end her life.

However, we soon learn that this woman is the daughter of a family leader. The only acceptable retribution for this fatal mistake is another killing. But this time, it's Ghost Dog who is being hunted.

Louie does his best to convince the family otherwise, but it's his life or Ghost Dog's, and probably both. Ghost Dog is then left with the dual responsibility of defend-

ing his own life and maintaining his loyalty to Louie while at the same time killing all of his colleagues.

Whitaker is exceptional in his performance. Silent for most of the film, he periodically narrates text from the Hagakure, an 18th-century book of samurai code that serves as his spiritual guide.

Even in near silence, Whitaker conveys a wealth of rich emotions, ranging from the cold brutality he unleashes on the Italian mob, to the unconditional kindness and generosity he lavishes upon an immigrant ice-cream vendor and a young girl whom he meets in a local park.

The film is directed by Jim Jarmusch, who in 1996 gave us Dead Man, starring Johnny Depp. He has also directed music videos for the Talking Heads, Tom Waits and Neil Young. Jarmusch does a brilliant job with the screenplay he also wrote, taking what appears on the surface to be a simple tale of violence and weaving it into a masterpiece of quality writing, convincing acting and the best hip-hop soundtrack ever produced.

In its own right, the soundtrack gives us more aesthetic and rhythmic satisfaction than most films do in their entirety. RZA, the genius producer behind the Wu-Tang Clan, has produced a soundtrack of the highest quality, one that both enriches the storyline and provides a hypnotic mood for the film's setting.

Don't be fooled by the lackluster previews or the guy sitting next to you who thinks soundtracks should only be done by Elton John. This is a film worth seeing, more than once.

# Coppola's debut film uplifting

■ 'Virgin Suicides' is a visually compelling ghost story with romance, a bit of humor and a wealth of good spirit

By Eric Pfeiffer  
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It's okay to see a movie by yourself.

At least that's what I kept telling myself on my way to the Bijou last weekend, as I carried my notebook and smuggled junk food into the theater for the premiere of "The Virgin Suicides."

Two hours later, I couldn't have been happier for the solitude. Not because it was a terrible film. Just the opposite. This first-time offering from director Sophia Coppola is a work of art that would make dad proud. And it's a great film to think about afterward.

I love watching movies. When I was six years old, I saw "Return of the Jedi" seven times in the theater. When I was eleven, I secretly took the bus into the city to watch the midnight sneak preview of the first Batman film. And a few years ago, I broke-up with a girl because she and her mom dragged me to see "The English Patient." And they loved it.

As a film, "The Virgin Suicides" succeeds on many levels. First, the leverage of Francis Ford Coppola, who produced the film, cannot be denied. Would a first-time filmmaker get the support of James Woods, Kathleen Turner, Danny DeVito, Kirsten Dunst and an assortment of other big-name players for their directorial debut? Probably not.

But this is far from a case of daddy's girl does good.

Sophia Coppola takes the

wealth of talent and delivers a film of exceptional value.

The story revolves around five young women, the Lisbon girls, growing up in 1970s Michigan. At the onset of the film, we are introduced to the story through the narrative voice of a group of young boys who were fascinated by the girls and continue to be haunted by their ghosts 25 years later.

The youngest Lisbon, 13-year-

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old Cecilia, has just attempted to commit suicide. Through the boy's narration, we learn that she will be successful in her second try, and the rest of Lisbon girls will soon follow suit.

You might think this sets the stage for a depressing powerhouse of gothic proportions. It doesn't. The film is uplifting, very humorous and filmed with a strong sense of visual poetics.

Coppola lets us into the final days of the Lisbon girls, as they struggle for happiness and an an-

swer to their sister's death.

James Woods and Kathleen Turner both deliver great performances as the protective parents of the Lisbon girls. However, even in their overbearing, tumultuous, Catholic parenting, it's difficult not to like the parents. Especially Woods, who reveals a depth to his character that would easily be overlooked by less talented actors.

The supporting cast is tops as well. Kirsten Dunst is Lux, the most outgoing of the Lisbon children. Her world erupts with sexual energy as she begins to discover boys, alcohol and the new cultural revolution, i.e. drugs.

In hot pursuit of Lux is Trip Fontaine (Josh Hartnett), the school's heartthrob and cultural revolutionary, i.e. doper. Admired by all the other school girls, he only has eyes for Lux, who continually denounces his calling. It's a young romance that revels in its ethereal shedding of innocence.

The film's soundtrack was produced by the French band Air. The group's synth-retro feel fits exquisitely into the film's context, as they reveal a darker sound not heard on previous releases. I bought the film's soundtrack about a month before the film premiered, and it was the perfect gateway into this other-worldly collage of wonder, wisdom and death.

There are a few weak points to the film: more time could have been given in some of the character development, and some of the film's questions are unnecessarily left unresolved. But overall it's a fabulous debut from Coppola and, hopefully, a promise for another generation of great films from the Coppola family.

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