

'Blue Velvet' DVD examines sexuality

By Christopher Kelly
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(KRT)

Sandy: "I don't know if you're a detective or a pervert."

Jeffrey: "Well, that's for me to know and you to find out."

With those words, so begins one of the most spectacularly twisted sequences in American movie history. Jeffrey (Kyle MacLachlan) subsequently sneaks into the apartment of a lounge singer named Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini). He watches from her closet as she acts out a bizarre rape fantasy with a gangster named Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper). Frank breathes an aphrodisiac gas from a mask that he carries with him. He calls Dorothy "Mommy" and tells her, "Baby wants blue velvet." Dorothy responds by making him chew on the sash of her blue velvet robe. It only gets weirder, a few scenes later, when Jeffrey returns to Dorothy's apartment, and she starts begging him to hit her.

You might want to make sure the kids are asleep before popping "Blue Velvet" into the DVD player. Though, of course, the irony there is that director David Lynch's subject is essentially the same one that fuels so many family films, including both of this year's biggest hits, "Spider-Man" and "Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones." "Blue Velvet" is about the violent awakening of an adolescent male sexual id. If Lynch made a film infinitely more honest and compelling than either Sam Raimi's or George Lucas', it's because he understands that you can't render the journey from boy to man in PG-13 terms.

"Blue Velvet" is back, 16 years after it first befuddled audiences, on a "special edition" DVD that reaches stores this week. But because Lynch - bless his soul - doesn't believe in "director's cuts" that add or subtract material to well-established works, there is no new footage here.

Still, this may be the best DVD released all year. Lynch did oversee a new digital transfer of the print. Accordingly, Frederick Elmes' lush photography vibrantly pops off the television screen. (If you've seen only the muddy VHS transfer of the film, you'll think you're watching a completely different movie.) More to the point, this disc gives us a chance to revisit one of the two or three finest American films of the

1980s. And to realize that, amazingly, it hasn't dated in the least. Quite the contrary, its vision of a suburban/underground culture that thrives - or perhaps the word is "co-dependents" - on sexuality and violence, seems all the more relevant and prescient in our era of Jon-Benet Ramsey and Chandra Levy.

"Blue Velvet" tells the story of handsome boy-next-door Jeffrey, home from college to care for his sick father; walking in a nearby field, the young man stumbles upon a severed human ear. Compelled to learn more, he teams up with the angelic Sandy (Laura Dern), whose father is the police chief. Gradually, they are drawn into a horrible circle of crime and violence and weirdos - many singing pop standards (watch out for Dean Stockwell's legendary cameo, as he lip-syncs Roy Orbison's "In Dreams.") Jeffrey eventually falls in love with Dorothy and finds that he, too, has sadomasochistic sexual impulses.

The greatness of the film - and the reason, I think, it did escape the ghetto of cult and has come to be rightly regarded as a modern classic - is that it so effortlessly weds satire and serious-mindedness. Lynch's point is that, yes, you can indeed laugh at the absurdity of small town, of a place in deep denial about its own muck. But that you also can't deny what lurks below. That within all of us lies the impulse to do evil, dirty things. And that we will do our best to push those tendencies below the surface.

Of course, the muck will always rise to the top - and that's why "Blue Velvet" is at once so funny and so scary. Lynch may be the only American artist who has envisioned the coming-of-age process in such stark, black comic terms. Indeed, the movie operates like a sick joke shared between two junior-high school boys in the locker room: It laughs at the idea of violent sexual fantasy, but at the same time it secretly stands in fear of that fantasy. It asks us: What if sex is just as corrupting, just as destructive, and just as compelling as we imagined it in our weirdest pubescent fantasies?

The film's genius, and its timelessness, lies in the fact that we never stop asking ourselves that question, no matter how old we get.

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Peter Utsey Emerald

Pulse brief

Cops hold R. Kelly on 21 child pornography charges

CHICAGO - Grammy Award-winning musician R. Kelly was arrested at his home near Orlando, Fla., on Wednesday following the return of a 21-count indictment in Chicago charging the R&B artist with child pornography stemming from a tape in which he allegedly has sexual relations with a teenage girl in his former Chicago home.

Kelly was arrested by police in Davenport, Fla., as he was preparing to leave

his house and rent a car to drive back to Chicago, authorities said.

At a news conference Wednesday, Kelly's attorney Edward Genson expressed outrage over Kelly's arrest. He called the action "unconscionable" and said he had made arrangements for Kelly, 35, to surrender to authorities in Chicago on Thursday.

"I've represented congressmen, I've represented judges, I've represented people charged in all sorts of offenses, and I've never had an agreement like this breached," he said.

Polk County, Fla., sheriff's police Sgt. Cassandra Kent said that Kelly would likely be held overnight in

the county jail for a court appearance tentatively scheduled for Thursday afternoon.

Kelly issued a statement Wednesday maintaining his innocence.

"Even though I don't believe any of these charges are warranted, I'm grateful that I will have a chance to establish the truth about me in a court of law," he said. "I have complete faith in our system of justice, and I am confident that when all the facts come out, people will see that I'm no criminal."

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