

Darkness in high summer

From cold and formal to kinetic and violent, with one stop at really bad self-abuse

BY RICHARD FRANCIS

"Life is disgusting," says Monsieur Hire. We know he's right once we see his world, although Hire later makes the amazing, and fatal mistake of forgetting that fact. A young girl has been accidentally but brutally murdered in a petty crime near Hire's home. Because Monsieur Hire is such a strange little man, all of the neighbors attempt to blame him. It is not just the recent death and the neighbors' reactions which make life so disgusting here; there is a general atmosphere of unhealthiness which pervades every scene, beginning with the opening where the investigating officer takes an obviously off-kilter interest in the young girl's corpse.

Cinema

Monsieur Hire is a masterpiece of voyeurism; a film of eyes: furtive, haunted, desiring, distrusting, coy, intense, accusing, prying. But despite all of these eyes, peepings, and invasions of privacy, none is what they seem, except Monsieur Hire, who is indeed a strange little man with a previous arrest for indecent exposure and a current obsession for Alice, the young woman across the way whose every move Hire watches through windows of his perpetually darkened apartment.

The film's plot has two overt focuses. How does Hire deal with the ever-tightening circle of accusations? How does he deal with Alice when she suddenly becomes aware of him and even more forcefully invades his privacy to return his attentions?

Director Patrice Laconte has given us even more in this adaptation of Georges Simenon's "Les Francailles de Monsieur Hire." Laconte moves the story beyond the cruelties of the neighbors and beyond the ironies of a Peeping Tom losing his privacy to give a subtle and sympathetic portrait of a character that most directors would treat on the same level as a garden slug. We are drawn into the strange sexual obsessions of Monsieur Hire to see the vulnerable and confused little soul inside the fastidiously-dressed, emotionally-closed, pasty-faced little man. Laconte even imbues Hire's fetishism with a sense of delicacy and elegance. But no punches are pulled; this man is strange and more than a little sick. Yet his plea that he doesn't harm anyone is startlingly moral given the context of the emotional cruelty of others around him.

Michel Blanc gives an intense performance as Monsieur Hire and is beautifully matched by Sandrine Bonnaire as Alice. The two create some marvelous scenes where their eyes and facial tics provide reams of additional material not written into the script. This is the kind of film which evokes superlatives, so there's more. Laconte, working through Denis Lenoir's masterfully framed, cool and stylized cinematography has created a film which is thoroughly economic while also evocative and atmospheric. This is all underscored beautifully by an

elegant, simultaneously insistent and languorous musical score by Michael Nyman (not enough!) known previously by way of Peter Greenaway's films.

Michel Blanc is true high art but it is also, simply, a damned good movie about the way in which individuals can be cruelly assaulted because they differ sexually and emotionally from the mainstream.

Where *Monsieur Hire* is cold and formal, Uli Edel's *Last Exit to Brooklyn* is wildly kinetic and violent; but life here is no less disgusting. *Last Exit* is a portrayal of a number of loosely connected characters in an industrialized area of Brooklyn, well into a long, brutalizing labor strike in the early 1950s. It is very much like descending to the bottom of a darkly-lit, overly-crowded rat cage and watching the inhabitants bite and claw each other to pieces... too powerless to attack the hands that have locked them into this cage together.

The real challenge, of course, is to create some sympathy and understanding in the midst of the fists, knives and blood. German director Edel does that and curiously seems to achieve it with a European sensibility which provides even more emotional distance from the 1964 novel by Hubert Selby, Jr. There is really no liking anyone in this film (which is probably why this film is "soft"... film parlance for unattended... and may have been pulled before you read this), but there are moments where one can at least find some respect for the twisted honor that these characters, but fleetingly, pull from the debris of their lives.

Crawling around at the bottom of this cage we have Tralala (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh), a brassy peroxide pseudo-hooker who seduces military men from a nearby base out into abandoned lots where her almost-boyfriend Vinnie and his gang can roll them; Harry Black (Stephen Lang), the shop steward who discovers that the newly achieved money and power of the strike can buy him friends and who buys himself, accidentally, into the world of transvestite hookers where he also discovers that he is gay; and Big Joe (Burt Young), a family man barely getting by who suddenly discovers that his daughter Donna (Ricki Lake of *Hairspray*) is not fat, but rather eight months pregnant.

Since we are dealing with same-sex orientation here, it is important to mention that despite Lang's deeply sympathetic portrayal of Harry Black, we are dealing with the standard old book and movie stereotype of the homosexual who, of course, can come to no good end. While it's true that a lot of characters are destroyed, the film places its few glimmers of hope on the heterosexual union of Big Joe (with his twistedly wholesome family) and on the marriage of Donna to a man who actually turns out to be decent. Further, Harry's troubles, while somewhat self-generated, don't bear the same cause-and-effect quality of Tralala's self-created hell and suggest more divine providence. That Harry's response to unrequited homosexual love would lead him to attempt to blow a child really had me scratching my head, no matter how drunk, and stupid, he was supposed to be. Harry does go from taking

pleasure (his "love" scene with his wife is legalized rape) to attempting to give it and we do finally see him in a Christ-crucified pose, but...

This is not a reason for condemnation (I put these things in context: a novel from 1964), but rather a point for contemplation. Edel does have heterosexuals down cold. In this dark world, filmed largely at night, each character finds love in some form and each is transformed in a twisted way demanded by the way their environment has shaped them. This is a grim film about American life which American films seem no longer able to portray oddly at a time when 20 percent of Americans are living below the poverty line and we need some social discussion of the ways that our human nature is warped by poverty and despair.

If the film contains any relief from the deep despair, it is in the dark, often graveyard humor that goes with such desperation. Horridly hysterical is Donna's breaking water as she stands on a chair while being fitted for her wedding dress as her parents argue whether mom's old wedding dress can be made to fit and then whether or not Donna can even have the baby when she isn't married yet.

This film is frank, brutal, very graphic and not at all for the timid; but it is not gratuitous and contains an honesty which is rare these days. That honesty makes it much more frightening than any summer horror flick bloodying its way through our summer theaters. The script is fine, the acting is superb, and the direction is good and (with the editing) jarringly tight. Highly recommended with the reservations noted.

If you are the sort who is not seduced by, or is very bored with, the standard summer fare of gratuitous violence, comic book simplifications of reality, neo-fascist "heros", and those so-called comedies where you are lucky to chuckle, I recommend both *Monsieur Hire* and *Last Exit to Brooklyn* as thoughtful and challenging films which take on more ideas, more successfully, than ten of your average summer fare figured together.

And then... Adrienne Shelly (playing a woman obsessed with apocalypse) looks something like Rosanne Arquette, Robert Burke (playing a "mass-murderer" released from prison and constantly mistaken for a minister) looks something like John Phillip Law, and *The Unbelievable Truth* (about their attempt to find love) looks something like a satire and something like a movie. I excuse a great deal in low-budget, independently-made, first-effort films and also don't like to write about films unless I have something good to say about it. However, writer/director Hal Hartley needs to learn how to tell a story; needs to learn how to use caricature and irony to create satire; needs to learn that good satire demands (explicitly or implicitly) a moral center; needs to learn how to use timing to create humor; needs to learn what it is he is doing before he does it; and, finally, needs to shed his homophobia somewhere along the way. One character in this film thought that he might have been gay (learning this is something like learning about Roy Cohn), but he's been "straightened out by the marines" (oh, yeah?). And you've just been straightened out by me. There is no reason to see this film including accident or acts of god, unless you are into banal self-abuse.



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