

FILM

Sex! Art! Drama!

Skip the soaps and tune into the life of Frida Kahlo instead

BY GARY MORRIS

FRIDA

Fox Tower, opens Nov. 8

Given artist Frida Kahlo's (1907-1954) iconic status, it's surprising that her story hasn't been told in a feature film before now. Or maybe not, considering she was not only a gifted painter but also an aggressively bisexual, alcoholic, violent-tempered, crippled communist who had an affair with Trotsky and the Soviet flag draped over her coffin. Not exactly Lifetime Channel material.

For Salma Hayek, Frida (aka the Unibrow for that cuddly caterpillar stretching artfully across her lower forehead) was a lifelong fascination, so much so that she battled the likes of Madonna and Jennifer Lopez to get the role. Boyfriend Edward Norton helped with the script and plays Nelson Rockefeller, dour patron of Kahlo's husband, Diego Rivera, who is portrayed by a predictable Alfred Molina. Julie Taymor (*Titus*) directs.

The result is a colorful, lively dual biography—it's as much about Diego as Frida—that collapses into cliché too often to be ultimately more than glorified soap opera.

The film certainly moves briskly, sampling the high and low points (probably more of the latter) of Frida's stormy life. First we see her as a scandalous student, running with a pack of intellectual boys and terrorizing the teachers. Then comes the famous bus crash that left her in a body cast for a month and began her slide into disability and chronic pain.

Still, she forges ahead, becoming a central figure in Mexico City's rich arts scene of the 1920s and '30s. Along the way she cultivated a seductive personal style (which included surrounding herself with peacocks and monkeys) and forged a powerful painting style, in which she appears as a kind of stoic lab specimen occupying surreal landscapes.

Much of *Frida* tracks her on-again, off-again relationship with Diego, whom she alternately adores and denounces as a "fat womanizer," the latter habit extending even to Frida's sister. Their scenes are standard histrionics—Frida screaming and hurling things, then Diego screaming and hurling things. Scenes like the cantina brawl resurrect every stereotype of "those hot-blooded Latins."

Still, Hayek seems made for the role, and



Tango never looked this good: Ashley Judd (left) and Salma Hayek in *Frida*

her excessive embrace of the character has definite moments of pathos.

Queer viewers will appreciate a red-hot tango, complete with lingering kiss, between Frida and her new pal Tina Modotti, played with sizzle by the gorgeous Ashley Judd. And the look of the film can't be faulted. Shot in vibrant color, it gives an immediate feel of Mexico in the early 20th century.

Taymor enlisted the Brothers Quay to devise a series of bizarre animated scenes, including a wonderful *Day of Death tableau vivant* to express Frida's nightmare in the hospital, which helps boost the sometimes sagging energy of the surrounding melodrama. **JM**

Love & hate

These femmes are really fatale

BY LISA BRADSHAW

MURDEROUS MAIDS

Clinton Street Theater, Nov. 1 to 10

In 1932 Le Mans, France, two 20-something sisters, Christine and Lea Papin, who were working as maids, were arrested for the grisly double murder of their mother-and-daughter employers, Madame and Geneviève Lancelin. When it was discovered the sisters were also lovers, France had one of the most celebrated European crimes of the century on its hands.

Quite titillating grist for the media mill, the story has continued to shock and enthrall through the decades, with two stage versions (one by gay writer Jean Genet), at least two books, a documentary and, with the new *Murderous Maids*, a total of four feature films.

In the United States the most-seen previous film version about "the monsters of Le Mans," as they were called, was 1994's *Sister My Sister*, by British director Nancy Meckler. The screenplay was penned by Wendy Kesselman, who adapted it from her own stage play.

Comparisons are being made right and left between these two films, with *Sister My Sister* slightly behind critically because of the filmmakers' rather loose interpretation of interactions between the Lancelins (who they



Two sisters in love in the unsettling *Murderous Maids*

renamed Danzard) and the Papin sisters. The intentions of both works are indeed clear—Kesselman and Meckler clearly see, or at least choose to present, the murder heavily based in class distinction, while *Murderous Maids* director Jean-Pierre Denis attributes the crime much more to the mental instability of Christine Papin.

No doubt, the older Papin sister was extremely troubled. She lost her father in the war and hated her mother passionately. She worked to keep herself and her sister away from home emotionally and financially. Falling in love with her sister and becoming obsessive about her while becoming increasingly enraged by her snobbish, condescending employers drives her to the zenith of anxiety, and she eventually snaps.

Sister My Sister is a dark, moody study of the insular society in which Christine and Lea exist and an examination of severe class distinctions. By the time Christine attacks her boss, you have nearly been convinced the boss has it coming. Joely Richardson (daughter of Vanessa Redgrave) is riveting in the lead role.

Murderous Maids takes on the more complex process of toning down the good vs. evil model of the house, instead focusing on the whole of Christine's experiences and mental state. This makes the murders ultimately more shocking yet still frames her as a sympathetic victim of sorts, particularly as the story continues into the young women's jail cells. Sylvie Testud is riveting in the lead role.

In the end, *Sister My Sister* is a finer piece of art. *Murderous Maids* is a finer piece of biography. Both films are very, very good. **JM**

Northwesterly Queer highlights from the Northwest Film and Video Festival

The Northwest Film Center presents the 29th annual Northwest Film and Video Festival from Nov. 8 to 16, which rounds up the latest best work of filmmakers from Oregon, Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia.

Let us help you out by telling you which ones are queer. All screenings are at the Guild Theatre, 1219 S.W. Park Ave.

The 33-minute "Donor" from Springfield filmmakers Adele Wilson and Eve Whitaker plays at 7 p.m. Nov. 8 as part of *Shorts of Passion*. You can guess what it's about.

It's a bitter trip to the supermarket for ex-lovers in Portland Andrew Blubaugh's four-minute short "He Said," which plays at 7 p.m.

Nov. 9 as part of *Shorts of Endurance*.

Sherman Alexie's film *The Business of Fancydancing* returns to the Guild after a run last June. Native American writer Seymour Polatkin is caught between his present Seattle gay intellectual writer lifestyle and his past on the rez. Note: *Just Out* previously gave this a fairly bad review.

A great sneak peek opportunity is the screening of Gus Van Sant's new film *Gerry* about two friends (Casey Affleck and Matt Damon) who get lost on a road trip. See it here at 7 p.m. Nov. 15 or wait for the opening about three months from now.

—LB **JM**



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