



Brian Cox and Paul Franklin Dano in *L.I.E.*

nant (in a grueling scene he confesses his problem to his own young son) and pathetic, but certainly not gay.

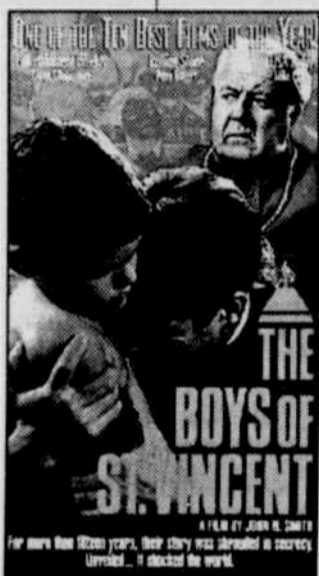
Another complex portrait of a sexual predator can be found in *L.I.E.* (United States, 2001) Some viewers might find "Big John" at least partially coded as a gay stereotype: unmarried, worldly, well-off, compulsive and bumped off in the end just as gay men in the movies so often were. But in making the character a real person rather than the scary shadow of the popular cliché, the film shifts the paradigm from gay/pedophile to human/monster. Like other such characters here, he regrets what he is. Told by one of his displaced boys, "You should be ashamed of yourself," he replies, "I am...I am...I always am."

The economic motive in *L.I.E.* (Big John pays and sometimes houses his victims) is also seen in some of

the European films surveyed. The teen-age boys in *Our Lady of the Assassins* (Colombia, 2000) hook up with older men for money and a respite from the social chaos of Medellin. The film has a queer consciousness—the lead character, a 60-year-old writer, sarcastically tells one of the boys: "Someone who's slept with over 1,000 boys isn't a fag. He's a far-out guy, right?" But the relationships here are more mutually exploitative than exploitatively queer, reactions to an impossible social situation.

Social forces also drive the relationship in *Ernesto* (Italy, 1979) between the title character, a 16-year-old bourgeois youth, and a 30-ish dock worker. Eventually their roles reverse, and Ernesto abuses his abuser in this class parable.

There are still other variations. *Clay Farmers* (United States, 1988), a featurette at a mere 60 minutes, is so fearful of equating homosexuality with pedophilia that it refuses even to clarify the relationship between the two main characters, young men working together on a farm, much less their interest in a neighbor boy abused by his alcoholic father.



Two of the most controversial films in this genre are *For a Lost Soldier* (The Netherlands, 1982) and *Eban and Charley* (United States, 2000), which do the unthinkable in portraying the adult/youth relationship as positive. *Soldier* treats what happens between a 12-year-old boy (the film is based on his World War II memoir) and a Canadian soldier liberating his village as a romance that became a joyous memory rather than a repressed one. *Eban and Charley*, about a 29-year-old soccer coach and a 15-



Andrew Kelley and Maarten Smit in *For a Lost Soldier*

year-old boy, makes society the villain, thwarting what to the principals is simply a love affair. Neither film apologizes for these relationships.

Nor does *Queer as Folk*, though the "boy" is nearly of age. The highly successful gay soap opera features 30-ish sex hound Brian involved with 17-year-old Justin. (In the British version this character was 15, so Showtime is playing it safer.) Brian can be read as either sexually liberated or amoral and predatory, or perhaps both, but his affair with Justin is just one of many kinds of relationships shown, not the focus. Now, of course, as *QAF* heads into its third season, Justin is a consenting adult.

The question of what kinds of messages these works are sending to the mainstream is almost moot, since most of them never reach the mainstream. They're as marginalized in their way as their subject, staying safely under the cultural radar—playing at film festivals, in brief arthouse runs, on obscure videos—in order to exist at all. When they are actually looked at, though, it's clear that their messages tend to be as complex and varied, and not particularly queer, as the taboo topic they're exploring. **JM**

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