

SEX PART II

Lars von Trier goes deeper into sexual politics in the second volume of *Nymphomaniac*

A very involved thesis could be written about the deluge of prickly issues raised in *Nymphomaniac Vol. I & II*, Lars von Trier's four-hour, two-film epic about sexual discovery and degradation. For now, let's focus on the "facts" of this modern Scheherazade fable: A man, Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård), happens upon a woman, Joe, (Charlotte Gainsbourg), lying beaten in an alley; Seligman, a middle-aged virgin, brings Joe to his home, where she proceeds to recount, in a single night, the story of her life framed as a descent into the hell of sexual addiction.

Beyond this, any easy discussion of *Nymphomaniac* ends, and we progress into the existential realm of total relativity, where fancy theoretical discussions about religion, death, desire, history, politics and the nature of truth itself are complicated by the bump-and-grind of sexual obsession.

Previously in these pages, *EW* critic Molly Templeton did a bang-up job writing about the first installment of *Nymphomaniac* (see wkly.ws/1q5), leaving the second film for yours truly. If *Vol. I* spends two hot-and-bothered hours setting the movie's carnal mystery in motion, *Vol. II* unleashes the beast, as Joe's stories grow increasingly harrowing — episodes of sadism, humiliation, objectified racial predilection, self-mutilation and, finally, a kind of psycho-sexual espionage where Joe plays hired muscle to Willem Dafoe's crime boss.

Like the Marquis de Sade before him, von Trier uses the raw reality of fucking as both springboard and portal into heady philosophical discussions about everything from the ontology of evil to the essence of democracy. Underlying all of this is the idea that the flashbulb of sexuality reveals our truest, deepest selves and, consequently, how we choose to live and die.

Von Trier is after big fish in *Nymphomaniac*, and the results are uneven but never dull. His ambition is admirable, and his courage to push the envelope is his greatest strength as a filmmaker. *Nympho Vol. II*'s conclusion, which may shock you, is disconcerting in that it seems both ham-fisted and inevitable. It begs the question: If Joe were a he instead of a she, would her dark, complex sexual past even bear remarking? ■

NYMPHOMANIAC VOL. I Lars von Trier's first installment follows a battered and bloody Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg) relating the story of her life in sex — losing her virginity, competing with her best friend for sexual conquests on a train, her ability to juggle eight-plus lovers — to Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård), a older gent who finds her in an alley. If the parade of cocks doesn't scare you away, you'll be back for *Vol. 2*. (*Bijou Metro*)

BAD WORDS In a performance full of subtle charm, Jason Bateman in his directorial debut plays a 40-year-old loser who finds a loophole in the rules and enters the national spelling bee, only to terrorize the other adolescent contestants with a barrage of foul, filthy insults that take your breath away — right before you start laughing hilariously. A refreshingly un-PC dark comedy with a sneaky big heart. (*Regal Valley River Center*)

THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL This European adventure set between two world wars is a visual delight directed by Wes Anderson. Memorable characters are played by top-notch actors you might not recognize at first: Ralph Fiennes, Adrien Brody, Jeff Goldblum, Harvey Keitel, Jude Law, Bill Murray and many more. Word of mouth is packing theaters. (*Regal Valley River Center*)

GLORIA Chilean director Sebastián Lelio's new film is a triumphant corrective to the lame idea that old people have few concerns beyond Metamucil and bucket lists. Thanks to a stellar performance by Paulina García, *Gloria* becomes a kind of middle-age coming of age story — the portrait of a woman, not in mid-life crisis but simply in crisis, and seeking to wrangle love and meaning from the lonely circumstances of her life. (*Bijou Art Cinemas*)

AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY Dysfunctional is too mild a designation for the family at the center of *August: Osage County*, director John Wells' adaptation of Tracy Letts' 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning play. The film has the deeply tragic bent of a Southern gothic, and it leave no stone unturned when it comes to digging up family secrets. The pile-up is fantastic, and there's a thrill in that, a catharsis. (*David Minor Theater*)

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