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Risk-Taking and Poetic Imagination

An Interview With Julien Rejl

Since 1969, the French Directors' Guild (SRF) has held the Directors' Fortnight in parallel to the Cannes Film Festival. Often more adventurous than the official selection, highlights of recent years have included *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, *Will-o-the-Wisp*, *Neptune Frost*, and *The Tsugua Diaries*. The section has also featured higher profile and starrier French and English language films from directors like Mia Hansen-Løve, Robert Eggers, and Alex Garland.

Last February, the SRF announced that the following year's festival would be general delegate Paolo Moretti's last, and that they would additionally be undergoing a wider overhaul. That June, they brought in Julien Rejl to spearhead those changes. Though there were still some familiar faces in this year's lineup, like Hong Sang-soo and Michel Gondry, Rejl's first official selection also featured a number of films from new directors, some of which did not come into the festival with sales representation. Though this meant slightly less hype going in, the choice has already paid dividends, as this year's Camera d'Or — awarded to the best first feature across all sections of Cannes — went to Fortnight's *Inside the Yellow Cocoon Shell*. After the conclusion of his first festival, we caught up with Rejl via email.

I remember reading when Director's Fortnight announced that they were looking for new leadership they also said they were looking for someone to come in with a new vision. What about that task appealed to you?

What I found attractive about the Fortnight is that it still embodies a spirit of adventure and exploration, without having to be accountable to any market logic. In this position, I think it's still possible to move the lines a little. The DNA of the Fortnight is to be the unofficial selection of the Cannes Film Festival. Its primary mission is to welcome free films, made by filmmakers who experiment and invent their own language with the means of cinema. These may be "genre films" that play with their own codes, or "arthouse films" that venture into uncharted territory. The richness of the Fortnight lies in its diversity and its lack of hierarchy between popular and insider cinema. It favors the discovery of young filmmakers, but takes the liberty of inviting established directors. The audacity it values is that of escaping all formatting and lack of authenticity. It offers a place to films that are sometimes fragile, sometimes lame, that make no claim to perfection, because it supports risk-taking and poetic imagination.

What did you see as possible weaknesses in previous programming that you could address?

In some ways, certain programmations could occupy the same ground as the official selection. But I believe that it's by setting itself apart as much as possible from the others, by asserting its own identity, that the Fortnight gains in strength, legibility and recognition. In its selection process, the Fortnight must be able to adopt a *buissonnier* spirit, to get off the beaten track, to surprise. Only in this way can we encourage filmmakers to join us, in the friendly, cinephile atmosphere that has always characterized the Fortnight.

Having come into Directors' Fortnight with a particular vision, do you feel like you were successful in executing it? Are there adjustments you plan to make going forward, either in your approach or your execution?

I'm delighted with the work we've done with the selection committee, but it's only a start, and there's still a lot of progress to be made. It will take several years for this dynamic to bear fruit. With this first edition, we've tried to give this new Fortnight a direction and a personality. But the greatest challenges lie ahead. I want to further broaden the spectrum of films presented at the Fortnight: more documentaries, more animation, more hybrid formats, more genre films. But also welcome formats that escape all categories. Our freedom is to push back the boundaries of the idea of what cinema should be at Cannes.

Do you read reviews of the films you program? Are there other ways you gauge how people are reacting to them during the festival? Does that play into how you will approach future lineups?

I read the reviews of the selected films, because I'm an avid reader of film critics. I've always been passionate about film critics, which is why I've chosen several journalists to sit on my selection committee. What's more, at the Fortnight we're lucky enough to have a real audience in theaters, as we're the only selection to offer a ticket office. We can gauge their reactions both during the film and at the Q&A. This year, after the Q&A, many spectators came to talk to me every day. They were very warm and pleasantly surprised by this new Fortnight. On several occasions, they told me that the films in the Fortnight were different from those in the other selections, that it was good for them to have surprising cinematic experiences, far from films with a subject or message. But I like it when films provoke debate, when they disturb. I refuse to make a selection based on what critics, audiences, or the market thinks. When you're an artistic director, you have to have confidence in your own vision, and not give in on your convictions (especially as they're the result of a collective effort). It takes several years for an editorial line to take shape and mature. You have to fight for what you believe in. Future generations will judge.

Were filmmakers or producers surprised by your move away from giving preferential treatment towards films that were rejected from competition?

I don't know, I haven't had any feedback on that. But you're right that there's no such thing as preferential treatment. When you discover the latest film by a great, established filmmaker, it may

surprise you, it may impress you, or it may seem less innovative, more expected, even if the talent is still there. When you're putting together a selection that focuses on the singularity of the artistic gesture, adding a film like this can unbalance the whole. We'll never turn down a film we think is excellent. But when we have a few doubts, the question arises of making space for a younger filmmaker who, even if he or she is less talented than an established director, needs to be given a chance. There's also the case of films that are shown too late, after the Official Selection has given a negative response. This poses a twofold problem: firstly, there's the risk that we won't have the space to properly showcase such a film within the programming grid; but above all, the Fortnight is not a last-minute solution: it's like poker, if you choose to go all-in, you have to accept the risk of losing everything...

Do you think there may have been a gap left at the festival, especially given the quantity of French films vying for competition slots?

No, I don't think so. A selection is based on programming choices. If all the films were in Cannes, then the festival would lose its value. There are enough major international festivals to welcome the best films. At the Fortnight this year, we have chosen to reduce the number of films in selection. This decision reflects our desire to give greater prominence to each of the films selected, and at the same time to strengthen the Fortnight's identity and editorial line.

Did any of the politics of putting together the Directors' Fortnight lineup surprise you? I'm sure you can't get into too many specifics, but I think Víctor Erice's open letter in *El País*, in which he mentioned an invitation from Directors' Fortnight, came as a surprise to outsiders.

No, I wasn't really surprised. We've been very open about our enthusiasm with filmmakers, producers, sales agents, and so on. In return, there are those who are delighted by a frank and sincere dialogue, and those who prefer to up the ante or are afraid of taking a decision too quickly. We give priority to those who, above all, want to show their film in the Fortnight. For Victor Erice's film, the only thing I can say is that the return of a great filmmaker who, like him, has nothing left to prove, would have made a great event at the Fortnight.

How does the pool of submissions to Directors' Fortnight differ from that of the Official Selection? Are you specifically soliciting films you think might fit the cadence of your selection better?

On the whole, films that submit to the Fortnight also submit to the Official Selection, and vice-versa. We receive almost the same number of films. On the other hand, it's true that during the prospecting phase, we sometimes encourage filmmakers to submit their films to the Fortnight, otherwise they simply wouldn't dare submit them to Cannes. ***— INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER***

PISTOL OPERA
Seijun Suzuki

What's in a name? Over the length of an intimidatingly monumental career, Seijun Suzuki gave us titles of great and peculiar beauty: *Take Aim at the Police Van* (1960), *Man With a Shotgun* (1961), *Capone Cries a Lot* (1985). Taken even without their accompanying visuals, these titles speak to a world of stylized and almost comic lyricism — where crime and violence are rendered as fizzy and cool as a summer beer. You *want* to get drunk on them. His métier was the yakuza film — a mass of B-movies produced for the Nikkatsu Company before his controversial departure in 1967. Deeply stylized (the familiar trifecta of sex, glamor, and violence), his baroque methodology makes him a kind of demiurge to the *somewhat* more easygoing style of Takeshi Kitano (who, alongside Wong Kar-wai, helped to bring Suzuki to international attention in the 1990s). A Stakhanovite of the Japanese studio system, Suzuki once remarked, "if I had an idea in the morning, it could be implemented in the afternoon."

Released in 2001, *Pistol Opera* is Suzuki's penultimate film — an "almost" coda that was also his first film since 1993, coming in from the cold after years of interruption (since 1967, he completed just seven projects, as opposed to the forty he shot between '56 and '67). Properly, *Pistol Opera* is a celebration of style and excess, a PoMo assemblage that jolts from one cultural reference to another, never quite stopping for more than a few brief moments in each of its deeply abstracted cul-de-sacs. It's also of note that the film is a kind of remake of, or disjointed sequel to, his earlier *Branded to Kill* (1967), which derailed his studio career decades prior after its producers claimed that his films made "no sense and no money."

Angular and stylized, *Pistol Opera* sees Suzuki draw on evocative chiaroscuro and a depth of focus that wouldn't be out of place in Orson Welles' filmography, as well as close-ups (of hands loading rifles, hands gripping pistols, bullets — gun stuff) that wink

knowingly at the formal elegance of Bresson. It's also very *weird*, almost impossible to follow, and so engorged on its own visual acrobatics that the narrative begins to erode under its own colossal weight. I've seen it described as "excruciating," which is a bit extreme — though it's no doubt far from taut. You can't help but lose your way. Indulgent? Possibly. Visually exciting? Undoubtedly.

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The plot follows No. 3 AKA "Stray Cat" (Makiko Esumi), an assassin employed by a shadowy organization known as The Guild. Through some briskly and almost indifferently described exposition, we learn that there is a war going on within this clique of callous killers; each of the top-billed among its ranks tries to off one another to claim the crown as the new No. 1 (currently held by the mysterious "Hundred Eyes"). Both ploddingly and electrically, *Pistol Opera* sets us up for a final confrontation. Throughout, No. 3 is joined by Sayoko Uekyo (Sayoko Yamaguchi) — her "agent" and fixer — along with her grandmother (the legendary Kirin Kiki), and another Sayoko (Hanae Kan), a young girl desperate to learn the art of the kill. Through the prism of this plot, it's impossible not to think of *Pistol Opera* as a reflection on Suzuki's entire cinematic project — a ransacking of the genre which he'd both helped shape and been spat out by. An older, now retired killer (limping from an injury that has taken him off the books) provides running commentary on No. 3's performance, cackling and hobbling into technique, killing blooms into an artwork." The old man could be a mouthpiece for Suzuki himself, reflecting on his *own* wisdom and technique, his transformation of brute violence into lyrical, alienating abstraction.

Fittingly, *Pistol Opera* eventually dissolves from its original premise into a prismatic, dreamlike combat more elusive than concrete, the gung-ho shooting of the first act replaced by a flowing choreography of murder that pushes into the territory of the mythological and performative. There are patient tracking shots reminiscent of Ozu (knee-height, gradual); leering crash pans; "dioramas" of people sprawled in forests alongside keyboards and mirrors. All this is accompanied by licks of jazz and synth-backed reggae. It's a lot.

Suzuki also utilizes elements of Japanese Butoh theater, the performance practice that arose in 1959. In Butoh, dancers — their bodies naked and painted in white chalk — explore ideas of the tortured and the grotesque; the "squat, earthbound physique" (as one of its founders described it) of everyday life. It is the attempt to conceive of a new corporeal language (twisting, alienating, and abstract) that would better reflect the dark realities of modernity. These writhing figures accompany No. 3 and No. 1 in their protracted final battle, a kind of Greek chorus to the fatal violence that binds them together. It's a lot.

With its jump cuts, non-linearity, and dream-logic configurations — where many scenes feel like total non-sequiturs — *Pistol Opera* functions as a surreal collage of other currents in Japanese post-war cinema: a blend of *pinku* (specifically, Atsushi Yamatoya's 1967 *Inflatable Sex Doll of the Wastelands*) and high modernism (calling to mind Hiroshi Teshigahara's 1966 *The Face of Another*), both of which were released around the time of Suzuki's own ejection from the filmmaking establishment. For each roughly nested reference to these other landmarks in Japanese film, Suzuki has his own poppy twists and turns to introduce — calling to mind Sion Sono's *Suicide Club* (2001) and anticipating that director's *Love Exposure* (2008). We're walking through the DVD closet and pulling titles left, right, and center.

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Popping with color, exaggeratingly in its compositional sense, and almost collapsing under its burden of references, Suzuki primarily thrills us by unlocking the potential of his set pieces. A forest battle conducted under a veil of noxious green smoke; frequent visits to a shimmering, SfX afterlife landscape; a wobbling plastic tree stuck in the soil, framed by the white massif of Mount Fuji. Faces are doubled, characters appear and disappear more quickly than we can keep up with them; the sheer bloated exuberance of the vibrating design is felt everywhere, through smash zooms and stylized murders.

Later, Dark Horse (Masatoshi Nagase) — one of the film's many, many assassins — touts his "sublime technique": the ability to shoot somebody in just the right spot to cause them to smile, while grimacing, in death. Here's another not unsubtle reference to what Suzuki is laying out for us: the forced smile in a hall of terrifying murder. We're locked into this excessively outre journey with him, just as he abstracts the yakuza genre into a place of pure style and unfiltered form, with vivid texture, absurdist costume, and machines that roar into frame and douse the screen in floods of poppy petals. As the retired hitman No. Zero remarks earlier in the film: "We make the impossible possible, and turn it into art." You can only grimace, or smile. ***— OWEN VINCE***

*BUCKY F*CKING DENT*

David Duchovny

Baseball and film aren't so different. Both are a national pastime, and both traditionally enforce a sort of spiritual mindfulness that is otherwise associated with church. In one, you congregate around a common goal in a big stadium of strangers, its eye open to the sky, its constituents reuniting in song and drink and finding common humanity. Just by proximity to the glory lived by another man "going down in history," we go along with him. This experience isn't dissimilar to moviegoing, where we sit in a darkened theater for two hours of solemn meditation and experience, with varying focus, the hero's journey through a myth. From *The Pride of the Yankees* to *42,* baseball has frequently been a framework for critically assessing everyday banality through that of baseball and the broader social rules, written and unwritten, that govern it.

It's unsurprising, then, that David Duchovny, actor and one-time Ivy League English academic, has added to this canon with *Bucky F*cking Dent*, his second go-round at the directorial mound. Duchovny isn't new to the material of this father-son dramedy, as it's actually an adaptation of his sophomore novel, published to relative critical success back in 2016. Here, he also stars as Marty, a terminally-ill Red Sox fan who reconnects with his Yankees-loving, novel-writing, and peanut-vending son, Ted (Logan Marshall-Green), during the 1978 pennant race between the Yankees and the Red Sox — in what appears to be the last time for Marty to experience Red Sox triumph.

The possibility of this triumph is vital to Marty's survival, because at the outset of the film, both father and son fashion themselves as failures. Ted has written twelve unpublished manuscripts, but according to his agent, he "hasn't lived and has nothing real to write about." Marty, meanwhile, grapples with feelings of guilt for his ineptitude as a husband and father, and is shown in the film's prologue to prefer chain-smoking daydreams and Sunday baseball over spending time with his wife. Ted moves back to take care of Marty, who rarely leaves his house other than to greet his barbershop friends (Evan Handler, Jason Beghe) and work with his "death specialist" Mariana (Stephanie Beatriz), a nurse assigned to guide Marty in his march toward death.

Much occurs across *Bucky F*cking Dent's* 100 minutes, although nothing feels new. Duchovny takes the viewer through traditional narrative beats — the slow reunion, the betrayal, the

reconciliation, the sweet departure — but does so with such melancholic force that it prevents the film from developing its own organic inertia. One of its major outward tensions revolves around Marty's psychosomatic link between the strength of the Red Sox's onfield performance and the strength of his health, as well as the interplay between that relationship and the one between father and son. Hoping to mend ties with his father while he still can, Ted takes it upon himself to ensure that the Red Sox are always winning by affirming a false reality for his dad.

With the help of Mariana, Marty's barber shop friends, and the newspaper boy, Ted manufactures a system that makes his house a "bubble, a closed system," disconnected from the world by a sabotaged TV connection and hidden daily newspapers. At one point, Ted even goes as far as to simulate rain and the sound of thunder just to convince his father that a Red Sox game had been rained out. Ted tries to play God, but just as soon as he finds he can't fake his way out of being found, he understands, too, that he can't make his dad better.

The problem of this tension isn't that its execution feels rushed or underwhelming, because the plot is relatively rushed and underwhelming, and thus moves out of frame without friction or strain. Instead, the issue, which dogs the entirety of the film, is that its coarse manipulation seems to mimic its central conceit. Neither Ted, a grown man estranged from his father, nor Marty, a wise-cracking curmudgeon, make for sensible dance partners in such a tango of deception, and the two frequently stumble into sentimentality while lacking the magnetism needed to pull the story along on its own. Viewers aren't allowed to sit back and watch this film like they're at the ball game, allowing themselves to form a perspective, to let things settle. Within its first five minutes, everything already feels like a fixed game, discouraging viewers from placing bets and players from playing at all.

Ultimately, however, *Bucky F*cking Dent's* playfulness is what makes it compelling enough to float through, despite the weakness of its central tension and the peripheral plot tangents that manifest in puddles of stepped-over nothing. Duchovny is often hilarious with his bag of dry, coarse vulnerability, and Marshall-Green, overcoming a slow start, adapts well to the former's space on screen. By the film's second half, the duo are thankfully more inclined to lobbing witty jokes than indulging soddy sentimentality. But despite this welcome course correction, *Bucky F*cking Dent* is unfortunately never quite able to strike a careful balance between these tonal poles, and it ends up feeling more like a vandalized hallmark card than a dry comedy earnestly wading through themes of loyalty, failure, and loss. Duchovny has in his hands a work leathered in emotion and threaded with humor, but he just can't seem to send it through the strike zone. **— CONOR TRUAX**

DOWNTOWN OWL

Hamish Linklater and Lily Rabe

It's undeniably passé — and often critically fruitless — to note the difficult "art of adaptation" when it comes to translating literature for the screen, but films like *Downtown Owl* throw the challenge into such sharp relief that it's impossible to skate past it unobserved. Based on the eponymous Chuck Klosterman novel and co-directed by real-life partners and creative collaborators Lily Rabe and Hamish Linklater, *Downtown Owl* squares up in the familiar space of small-town, character-driven dramedy, forecasting its climax in the opening sequence — a blizzard's a-comin', metaphor firmly in place. Indeed, if that description conjures up fond memories of Ang Lee's excellent *The Ice Storm*, the general narrative shape isn't far off, only here, character depth and psychological acuity are dropped in favor of single-quality archetypes, thinly-sketched dramatic impetus, and distractingly random aesthetic choices — we get exactly one scene each of the following: animation, dual fourth-wall breaks, and a sequence where internal dialogue is splattered on the screen in garish neon overlay.

Also like *The Ice Storm* — which it's hard to imagine didn't directly influence a culture maven like Klosterman — *Downtown Owl* is a film firmly rooted in its time and place. Rather than 1970s New England, we are dropped into 1983 North Dakota, in the titular small town of roughly 850 residents. This is Reagan's United States (the endless references to *1984* make that abundantly clear), and in the way of so much of that post-hedonism age's provincial living, Owl is a void that seems to exist outside of such particularities as time and place, the product of a conservative era's desire for the sham of 1950s sitcom America. That foundation, a survey of the secrets and lies that uphold romantic

notions of small-town life, isn't a poor place to build from — and one more ably explored in the source material — but it's all downhill from there for the film.

Downtown Owl follows Julia, a transplant to Owl (and viewer surrogate) who takes up the post of high school English teacher. The film's premise is basically just a smashed-together idiom: a big fish out of water in a little pond. As such loglines go, Julia meets a "cast of *characters*," which here include new best friend, fellow teacher, and resident badass, Naomi (Vanessa Hudgens, all Joan Jett vibes); local football fanatic, Horace (Ed Harris, asked to operate in wise old man mode); former football star and current grump, Vance (a mustachioed Henry Golding); the film's *Breakfast Club* "athlete," Mitch (August Blanco Rosenstein), an angsty and misunderstood quarterback; and Coach Laidlaw (Finn Wittrock), a teacher who seems to have a free pass for sleeping with students. As a medium, literature affords the space to flesh out the kind of overt setup and *types* found in *Downtown Owl* with nuance and depth, but the relative concision of film necessitates more finesse and grace, none of which is found here. Characters are never enriched after their introductory traits are established, and, as solely defined by cherry-picked details lifted from the source material, fail to evolve beyond mere affectations.

This pluck-and-plunk approach results in a tonal disaster. *Downtown Owl* moves incoherently through various phases, tilting toward limp dark comedy for a while, entering John Green-esque territory with a Scooby Doo crew of misfits briefly engaging in some amateur sleuth shenanigans at another point, and ending up with a hat-tip toward *Eat, Pray, Love*-styled self-discovery. Add to this the film's clear debt to a certain mid-aughts, post-Sundance aesthetic texture, and the whole thing scans as a series of superficial gestures rendered on screen with no thought given to retaining the cogency or shade of Klosterman's text. Clearer is the filmmaking duo's obvious affection for the material, but even this is buried under the entirely confused cinematic reconstruction of the source novel. Ultimately, then, *Downtown Owl* fails to register as anything more than a muddled assemblage of underlined passages. **— LUKE GORHAM**

THE SEEDING

Barnaby Clay

It's always a pleasure to find genuinely weird horror movies at a film festival, the kind too offbeat or otherwise too uncommercial to garner attention from the mainstream but (hopefully) destined to be viewed by an impressionable viewer at just the right age as to be irrevocably altered in some way. *The Seeding* isn't as unique as, say, *Skinamarink*, or as impressively insular as last year's *The Fifth Thoracic Vertebra*. But it manages quite a high-wire act for much of its runtime, and if its ultimate resolution feels a bit over-determined and familiar, there are still ample chills to be found.

Like a distaff reimagining of *Woman in the Dunes*, *The Seeding* begins with images of a filthy toddler wandering a barren wasteland while nibbling on a severed human finger. A series of abstracted landscape shots give way to a hiker traversing the

same terrain in search of the perfect spot to photograph a solar eclipse. The man (Scott Haze) comes across a young boy crying about his missing parents; determined to help him, the man follows the boy deep into the desert before realizing that the boy has run away from him and that he is now hopelessly lost. Shivering from the cold and without water, the man stumbles upon what appears to be an oasis — a large pit surrounded by high, sheer cliffs that houses a small shack. Descending down to the bottom of the pit via a strategically placed rope ladder, he meets the shack's sole inhabitant, a thirty-something woman (Kate Lyn Sheil) who offers him food, water, and a bed. The man is skeptical, hoping only to find a working phone or directions back to his car, but hunger and fatigue get the better of him. He drifts off to sleep, only to find in the morning that the rope ladder is gone, rescinded up the side of the cliff and leaving him with no egress.

The man (named Stone in the film's end credits, although he never tells anyone that during the movie proper) is naturally confused and terrified in equal measure; he tries desperately to escape, screaming for help and searching for the missing ladder, and when all else fails he attempts to scale the rocks barehanded. The woman (Alina, although she too is never named throughout the film's course) goes about her business, warning Stone to be careful but otherwise busting herself in the tiny kitchen while he flails about outside. To make matters more difficult, a group of feral young boys (including the one who initially lured Stone towards the pit) occasionally appear at the top of the cliffs to tease, taunt, and otherwise terrorize Stone. Alina seems content with ignoring them, brushing off their antics as simple "boys will be boys" behavior. What follows is a bizarre sort-of love story, as Stone and Alina get to know each other and he gradually comes to accept his seemingly permanent imprisonment. The boys lower supplies into the pit now and then, while the man learns to garden with his ample free time.

Writer/director Barnaby Clay takes his time laying out this narrative framework; working with cinematographer Robert Leitzell, Clay emphasizes the rugged terrain and coarse, dry textures of rocks and sand. It's a tactile film, the frequent use of overhead bird's eye views suggesting just how small these people are in the grander scheme of things. The film seems to take place over the course of roughly a year, but time becomes elusive in the pit. Stone never quite gives up hope trying to escape, even attempting to befriend one of the boys (a decision that leads to tragedy). Stone and Alina are obviously coded as a kind of Adam and Eve, their partnering a return to a "pure" form of domesticity. But things are not so simple; the boys become

increasingly aggressive, and for all her outwardly demure behavior, Alina clearly knows more about the situation than she is letting on. Sheil is a remarkable performer, her opaque body language and seemingly inscrutable visage put to such good use in films like *She Dies Tomorrow* and *Kate Plays Christine*. Here, these qualities mask something much darker, and when she's finally allowed to let loose it is genuinely unnerving. It's a shame that *The Seeding* eventually turns into just another folk horror riff, precipitated by an act of cruel violence that alters the tenuous balance that the couple has maintained, but it is so well made that viewers might not mind. The film might suffer from some familiar tropes, but they're wrapped up in an extremely appealing package. **— DANIEL GORMAN**

MILLI VANILLI

Luke Korem

The oft-told story of the French-German dance-pop duo known as Milli Vanilli, comprising Fabrice Morvan and Rob Pilatus, is a scandalous tale of exposed fraud that was also a pop-culture punchline for many years, before it ended in tragedy. In Luke Korem's documentary *Milli Vanilli*, this story is given more perspective and nuance, told largely through the recollections of surviving member Morvan. When it was revealed in 1990 that Milli Vanilli's massive hit album *Girl, You Know It's True* — which went six-times platinum and garnered three #1 singles in the U.S. — did not feature the vocals of the two men presented as the singers, Morvan and Pilatus shouldered the lion's share of the blame, ridicule, and outrage for the exposed deception. This film makes the compelling case that they, while certainly complicit, were ultimately not to blame, and suffered the most from the scheme, while the big-wigs who masterminded and greatly profited (including Arista Records' head honcho Clive Davis) escaped with their reputations largely unscathed.

Korem takes care to explore Rob and Fab's origins. Both emerged from similar backgrounds of poverty and broken homes to meet in Munich, where they became popular dancers and entertainers on the nightclub circuit. This brought them to the attention of German producer and songwriter Frank Farian, who recognized that the duo's stunning good looks could be very marketable in a pop music context, and quickly signed them to a contract. Desperate to be stars, Rob and Fab eagerly put their names to the agreement without reading it as closely as they should have.

Farian was the producer behind the popular '70s disco act Boney M., fronted by Bobby Farrell, a dancer who didn't actually sing, but lip-synched vocals provided by Farian himself. Farian figured

he could pull off a similar trick with Rob and Fab, so when he presented them with the track that would eventually become the worldwide smash hit "Girl, You Know It's True," he informed them that they would not be singing on the track. Morvan says in the film that they tried to back out of the deal, but were forced to comply because of the debt they had incurred to Farian due to the contract they'd signed. However, Farian's assistant and paramour, Ingrid Segieth, who's also interviewed in the film, refutes this, claiming they didn't object to these terms. Although this issue is left as a he-said-she-said account, one comes away more inclined to believe Morvan's version of these events.

The trifecta that was the "Girl, You Know It's True" single, the quickly recorded follow-up album, and Milli Vanilli themselves, quickly blew up in popularity, especially in the U.S., and did so well beyond the expectations of everyone involved. In retrospect, it's clear that the massive deception at the heart of the Milli Vanilli phenomenon was impossible to sustain for very long. The first crack in the scheme occurred on July 21, 1989, during the Bristol, CT stop on the Club MTV tour, when the backing track Milli Vanilli were using on stage malfunctioned and began skipping. Incredibly, this embarrassing episode was able to be contained and did little to derail the Milli Vanilli juggernaut. What finally did them in was what should have been their ultimate triumph: winning the Best New Artist award at the 1990 Grammys. Shortly after this win, Charles Shaw, the rapper who was one of the real voices on the album (and who's interviewed in the film), gave an interview exposing Milli Vanilli's deception. At the same time, Rob and Fab were demanding that Farian let them sing on future recordings, threatening to go public themselves. Farian responded to all this by holding a press conference in which he blew up the scheme that he himself spearheaded. The result was that Rob and Fab were left holding the bag, their reputations and careers destroyed, while Farian emerged relatively unharmed and able to continue in the music business.

Milli Vanilli, in the end, functions as a potent cautionary tale about the pitfalls of pop stardom, and of the exploitation of the naïve and vulnerable that often exists as the flipside to glittering fame. More disturbingly, it's also a story of Black artists used up and discarded by white producers and music executives. And this story's conclusion is simultaneously tragic and redemptive. Rob Pilatus, in his post-Milli Vanilli years, spiraled into addiction and despair, culminating in his drug overdose in 1998. Fabrice Morvan, in contrast, managed to survive, marry, and raise a family in Amsterdam, and now tours the nostalgia circuit, performing Milli Vanilli songs — in his own voice — to appreciative crowds. It's ultimately the arc of his experience that forms the strongest aspects of this fascinating and well-told documentary. ***— CHRISTOPHER BOURNE***

HAPPY CLOTHES

Michael Selditch

A snakeskin tube top and cowboy hat. A belt worn on a bare midriff, *above* the belly button. And, of course, the famous white tutu. Who but the inimitable Patricia Field could come up with these bizarre, divisive, and now-iconic outfits? As a stylist and costume designer, the former NYC club kid is known for putting together ensembles from wildly disparate pieces that have no business looking good together — "until they do," as actor Michael Urie explains. Her secret? They *have* to make her happy.

Michael Selditch's aptly named documentary, *Happy Clothes: A Film About Patricia Field*, surveys the stylist and costume designer's 50-over year career through interviews with Field, now 81, and her collaborators, assistants, and celebrity fans. With her flaming red hair and pack-a-day rasp, Field's own demeanor and physical appearance is as unmistakable as her on-screen outfits: kooky, arresting, and unapologetic. Since her parents owned a dry cleaner shop, she grew up surrounded by clothes and developed a knack for business. She first made her mark during lower Manhattan's grimy, glamorous heyday in the 70s and 80s, where she befriended soon-to-be divas like Amanda Lepore, Laverne Cox, and Candis Cayne. Many of them worked at or patronized her eponymous boutique (archival footage includes an interview with a baby-faced RuPaul waxing poetic about rhinestones), which was a magnet for celebs like Madonna and Cyndi Lauper as well as NYC's misfit underbelly. After decades nurturing drag queens, clubbers, and artists like Keith Haring and Basquiat, Field sold her store to focus on styling Hollywood and the silver screen.

Selditch opens the documentary by discussing Field's most recent costume design collaborations, the shows *Emily in Paris*

and *Run the World*. These segments are interesting mostly because they're appetizers for the main course, which is, of course, *Sex and the City*. Over the course of six seasons and two feature films, Field's sartorial bravado perfectly aligned with her stars' fashion fearlessness, and the results have spawned a cultural afterlife that includes a viral Instagram account, podcast, book, and live events celebrating "Every Outfit on Sex and the City." Interviews with Kim Cattrall and Sarah Jessica Parker, who played glamorous sexpot Samatha Jones and journalist Carrie Bradshaw, who'd famously rather have *Vogue* than dinner, are filled with genuine affection and admiration. With actors Kristin Davis and Cynthia Nixon rounding out the show's stars, Field created four women whose wardrobes so encapsulated their personalities that they transformed from memorable characters to near-universal archetypes. As such, she considers herself more of a stylist than a costume designer, since she's as much attuned to the actor as the character they're playing. The idea of trust is a recurring theme, and Field recognizes that clothes are probably the easiest way for a person to make themselves vulnerable to judgment from friends and strangers alike. As the interviews make clear, part of her success is the way she builds trust — and eventually confidence — with her actors, even as she puts them in ensembles that have literally never been seen before or since.

Interviews with *Ugly Betty*'s Michael Urie and Vanessa Williams further expound on Field's idiosyncratic vision, especially contrasting her wacky, colorful work in later seasons against the safer choices made by the show's first costume designer (actress America Ferrera, the titular Betty, is unfortunately not featured). And there's an all-too-short pit stop to discuss *The Devil Wears Prada*, for which Field received an Oscar nod for Best Costume Design. Being newer shows, *Emily in Paris* and *Run the World* (which is explicitly described as a "a Black girl's *Sex and the City*) haven't quite developed the same cultural cachet as Field's other projects — yet. In the last segment of the film, Field and her assistants are in a costume fitting with one of *Run the World*'s stars, Bresha Webb. As Field mixes and matches a dizzying array of skirt suits, thigh-high fishnet boots, bolero jackets, and patent leather accessories, it's clear that her singular vision doesn't rely on trends and never has. Instead, every seemingly outlandish combination or clash of patterns and textures comes down to

one thing: *whether it makes her happy.* Given the current obsession with "quiet luxury" and prestige labels' insistence on peddling endless swathes of five-figure beige, what's more flattering than exuberant colors, riotous patterns, and unabashed joy? ***— SELINA LEE***

THE SPACE RACE

Diego Hurtado de Mendoza & Lisa Cortés

Thanks to recent advancements, space travel, once reserved for the world's elite pilots and engineers, has become something any person with bookoo cash can achieve. The likes of Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin and Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic are quickly making space flight less of a scientific achievement and more of a luxury endeavor. It's partially thanks to these companies that more than 600 people have journeyed to at least sub-orbital heights. When it comes to actual professionals, NASA has sent more than 350 people into space, of which only 16 were Black individuals (as of 2022). While films like *Hidden Figures* have sought to highlight the role of Black people in the space program, few works have detailed the achievements of Black male and female astronauts specifically. *The Space Race*, Diego Hurtado de Mendoza and Lisa Cortés' latest (and her second documentary to premiere at a festival this year), looks to fill this void.

In 1983, Colonel Guion S. Bluford Jr. became the first Black man to travel to space, but the history of Black space travel goes all the way back to the early days of NASA. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy recommended NASA administrators select a Blackcandidate for the astronaut program in an era of escalating racial tension during the Civil Rights movement. Edward Dwight was chosen for the program, but controversially was not selected for spaceflight, and he subsequently resigned from the Air Force in 1966 in response to the "racial politics" that kept him from advancing. Twenty years later, NASA "corrected" that grievance by selecting Bluford, Frederick D. Gregory, and Ronald E. McNair as part of Astronaut Group 8, which was also the first group to include women and a person of Asian descent. All three would eventually make it to space, though McNair would tragically die in the *Challenger* disaster.

While it's none too difficult for a director to spin archival footage, old photographs, and interview voiceover into a movie, it takes a more refined skillset to craft a compelling portrait of those elements in a way that transcends mere info dump. *The Space Race*'s directorial duo are thankfully up to task, and in fact it's this very simplicity that helps distinguish their film. Its basic chronological structure holds attention, and it's clear through their careful, meticulous construction that the filmmakers have a passion for the material. But the film mostly succeeds on the strength of its subjects; Bluford, Gregory, and several other important Black figures in the aerospace field came together for the project, each lending a particular perspective that helps to enrich its telling.

Eventually, toward the end of the film, we meet Victor J. Glover, the first Black crewmember to live on the International Space

Station. Glover, whose first mission took place in November 2020, reflects on his monumental role within the program, taking stock of his historic flight within the context of present-day civil rights in the United States, specifically the murder of George Floyd and the consequent Derek Chauvin trial. Consideration of the gulf that this encompasses constitutes the film's final destination, though it's an ending fitted with a more hopeful tone of promise and opportunity, while still acknowledging that the racism and indignity that Ed Dwight dealt with all those years ago is still very much alive today. This endpoint is interesting and certainly important, but *The Space Race* hedges when it comes to addressing the very American brand of systemic racism at the root of all such problems in favor of a more optimistic tone, lending a bit of a rose-tinted sheen to the otherwise excellent work. As the future of travel moves toward space tourism, which caters to the kind of unethical capital that directly relies on and results in structural inequities and injustices, it seems reasonable to retain pessimism for that eventuality. But for the more hopeful, *The Space Race* also suggests an encouraging route for mankind's future exploration.

— EMILY DUGRANRUT

HE WENT THAT WAY

Jeffrey Darling

Both the serial killer film and the road movie have storied and traceable cinematic histories, operating in movements that often weave past and around each other, occasionally merging at a zeitgeist-driven nexus. The two sub-genres make for a compelling dialogue, with our cultural conception and artistic reflection of the road trip typically inviting romantic notions of freedom and possibility, punctuated with all the striking landscapes that highways carve across, while movie serial killers remind us of the danger that could invade our very homes. The early 1990s offered perhaps the most tangible intersection of these cinematic preoccupations, with films like *Kalifornia* and *Natural Born Killers*, but the branches of this particular tree extend much further. The likes of *The Hitch-Hiker*, *Badlands*, and *Bonnie and Clyde* provide the most obvious earlier foundation, but the "road" ultimately proved more important than the "trip," and depictions fanned out to include works like Steven Spielberg's *Duel*, which in turn spawned a mini cottage industry with efforts like *Breakdown* and *Joy Ride*.

All that context may seem cursory preamble, but it's useful in establishing the disparity between that hallowed lineage of works and the absolute disaster that is *He Went That Way*. Starring Zachary Quinto as Jim, a struggling animal trainer schlepping his chimpanzee Spanky across the country for a gig, and Jacob Elordi as Bobby, the seemingly conscienceless interstate killer who bums a ride, the film is a bizarre, chaotic mess of period signifiers and facile psychological portraiture. Tighter conceptual control might have constructed something like an offbeat Lynchian grotesquerie à la *Wild at Heart* or a noirish Coens' oddity; after all, *He Went That Way* is at its core a destination-agnostic Odyssean journey, firmly rooted in '60s unrest and replete with off-kilter waypoints populated by screwball characters.

But in order for the film to work, a tonal high-wire act is required, and *He Went That Way* doesn't even make it off the ground. The film is conceived as a demented buddy movie of sorts — really the only thing it's bringing to the murderer-on-the-move template — but its character work is so arch and affected that it comes across as a CliffsNotes version of spree killer psychology. Presumably tapped here thanks to his work as hot jock sociopath Nate Jacobs in *Euphoria*, Elordi somehow makes that show's melodrama seem subtle, all broad loose- cannon posturing. Indeed, the whole thing almost plays as a farce of itself, which leaves Bobby feeling more like Fonzie or Danny Zuko than a genuine James Dean type. Add to that Jim's bafflingly placid response to his circumstance wherein he basically handles Bobby with kid gloves, and *He Went That Way* bleeds further tension and stakes with every passing scene. By the end, there's very little left to hold viewers' attention, that is, beyond the trippy effect of watching an actor wearing an uncanny and overlarge animatronic chimp head endlessly bounce about. Without referencing the annals of cinema history, it feels safe to say it's not a good sign when the most believable element of your film is a fake monkey boasting all the verisimilitude of an Eric André bit.

— LUKE GORHAM

JOHN EARLY: NOW MORE THAN EVER

Emily Allan and Leah Hennessey

The motley lineups of the Tribeca Film Festival often may not deliver the riches of more prestigious festivals, but they do provide space to expand the notion of a film festival. Tribeca often gets more press for its events (some featuring co-founder Robert De Niro and his collaborators) than for its film premieres. This year's Spotlight Narrative section, though, does offer a screen-specific curiosity in the form of *John Early: Now More Than Ever* (directed by Emily Allan and Leah Hennessy), an HBO comedy special. Early's work, including in collaboration with Kate Berlant, has often spanned various media, and there *are* plenty of bells and whistles in *Now More Than Ever,* but the film — Tribeca's program refers to it as a feature, so "film" seems like viable shorthand — largely hews to the outline of a standup special. Though Early is backed by a band who performs several cover songs with him and appears in fictionalized backstage footage, a majority of the runtime is devoted to him onstage, telling jokes.

It's fortunate, then, that Early is an exceptional stand up

comedian. His first joke compares the infamous Donald Trump *Access Hollywood* tape to his own locker room talk as a closeted gay teenager. Making fun of Trump risks being labeled as hack work, and while it may not be Early's best bit, it's both effective and indicative of his style. He certainly isn't afraid of political or social commentary, both of which run through the special, but they take a backseat to joke construction. Yes, belittling Donald Trump is an easy way to get a Brooklyn (or Tribeca, or HBO) audience on your side, but the bit is less about saying anything about Trump than it is about Early's recontextualized delivery of Trump's lecherous comments. Even more effective than Early's delivery is his physicality, showcased in the following joke: Taking the phrase "be yourself" as his target, he points out the ironic uniformity with which the cliche is deployed. The punchline, though, isn't an excavation of deep truth, it's Early striking a ridiculous pose that he claims is "what they want" when they tell you to be yourself. Certainly there is a banality to the cliché that Early is highlighting, but the bit isn't funny because he's excavating a great truth; it's funny because he looks silly.

It's somewhat perplexing, though, that *Now More Than Ever* implements two separate deviations from the standup form when Early functions so creatively within its space. The backstage bits are the less successful of the two. At their best, they feel close to actual backstage footage beset with the occasional absurd flourish, but as they progress, they begin to feel more often like half-conceived sketches. The character Early plays, an inane and oblivious boss without boundaries, seems incongruous with his standup persona, which demonstrates the self-awareness to admit that he's one of the vapid Millennials he's making fun of. By the time these bits coalesce into a plot, they feel both perfunctory and disarmingly unpleasant. If the segments serve to disentangle Early from this character he plays, then his musical performances might, on the surface, do the opposite. Music is still a performance, but it's often one more vulnerable and genuine than comedy, possibly serving to narrow the divide between man and artist. But while Early doesn't seem to treat any of the pop songs he sings with ironic detachment, he does play with notions of sincerity in his performance. He's still playing a character, but the diva showboating beyond his vocal ability is more in line with his comedic persona than the character he plays in the backstage bits. And, though he doesn't drop the persona entirely, the vulnerability inherent to singing on a stage still comes through.

The cinematic construction of the special is more conventional than Early's comedy, but the film form does at least follow the latter's direction. Early often plays with perspective, telling jokes that feel personal in the second person, and utilizing fluid shot lengths and angles helps enhance this off-kilter effect without ever being distracting. There's also a clear intention to the deployment of audience shots, which aren't as sparse as in *Stop Making Sense* — to take a filmed performance that has largely been accepted within film canon — but are used only when Early's interaction with the audience is important to the project's incident. So while neither the scripted bits nor the musical performances take the film beyond the form of the standup special in a way that would justify its inclusion in a film festival, perhaps it's more interesting, anyway, to make the argument that no such limitation of form need be imposed at all. **— *JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER***

GLORIA GAYNOR: I WILL SURVIVE

Betsy Schechter

Gloria Gaynor's 1979 classic disco track "I Will Survive," written and produced by Dino Fekaris and Freddie Perren, boasts as its nominal subject a woman's defiant kiss-off to a former lover attempting to re-enter her life. However, in the 40-plus years since its release, the song's meaning has moved well beyond that to become an anthem of inner strength and resilience — the will to overcome struggles and obstacles in life. As powerfully demonstrated in Betsy Schechter's documentary, *Gloria Gaynor: I Will Survive*, song and singer were perfectly matched, since Gaynor herself had gone through very difficult circumstances in her own life.

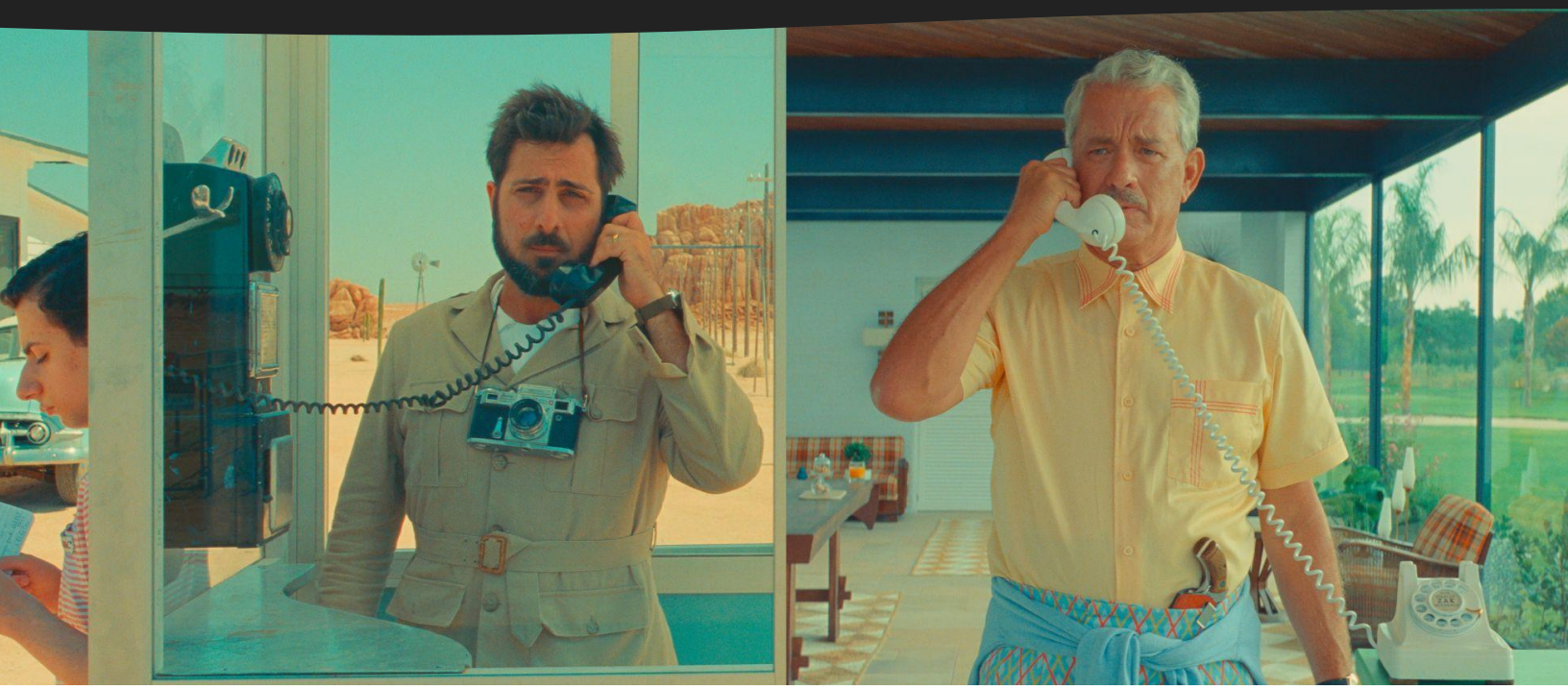
The film employs two parallel narrative tracks, detailing the long, hard road to "I Will Survive" — her greatest musical success — and documenting her present-day efforts to record a gospel album called *Testimony*, along with the resistance she encounters as an older artist in the industry switching musical genres. From a young age, Gaynor suffered trauma, starting with her father abandoning her family early on, and then suffering sexual assault twice in her teens; later, her sister was murdered.

Her love of music and the discovery of her singing talent helped her through these horrific circumstances, but it took many years of recording and performing before she landed her first pop hit, a 1975 disco cover of "Never Can Say Goodbye," which the Jackson 5 had made bank with a few years earlier. Her subsequent singles were unsuccessful, and during a 1978 performance at New York's Beacon Theatre, Gaynor suffered a bad fall on stage, which briefly paralyzed her and led to physical problems for decades afterward. She later recorded "I Will Survive" while wearing a back brace.

After the enormous success of "I Will Survive," which nabbed the artist her first and only #1 pop hit, as well as the only Grammy ever awarded for best disco recording, more difficult years followed. The disco backlash that occurred not too long after was considerable, effectively putting a halt to Gaynor's career in the U.S., as it did for many others in the genre. Gaynor was able dd to sustain a career by touring Europe, but this entailed a grueling schedule that exacerbated the physical toll on her body caused by her stage injury. This schedule was imposed on her by her husband and manager, Linwood Simon, who would send her away to perform while he remained home philandering and abusing drugs. When Gaynor finally divorced Simon after 25 years of marriage, she was left in dire financial circumstances due to Simon's financial mismanagement.

It's an undeniably harrowing saga for a figure who has become larger-than-life in our cultural memory, but one told here will skill and compassion. There's no denying that *I Will Survive* hits the inspirational beats one would expect for this sort of story, but they are no less effective or moving for their familiarity. The final product is a potent portrayal of and ode to the survivor who so memorably gifted listeners with the ultimate song about survival.

— CHRISTOPHER BOURNE



ASTEROID CITY

Wes Anderson

When Carl Sagan wrote about the Pale Blue Dot photograph, in which a satellite photo frames Earth as a blue speck of dust in space light, secular humanism had found its Sermon on the Mount. Schopenhauer's pessimism, influenced heavily by Darwin's research on natural selection, had devastated a still-Christian intellectual sphere in late-19th century Europe by proclaiming biology — not God — to be a complete explanatory force for human existence, human desire, and human meaning. It is not an understatement to say that nearly all of modernist thought can be seen as a response to Schopenhauer and his early secular, scientific worldview — in fact, not a single serious thinker asked the trite but troubling "what is the meaning of life?" before him. Though the German philosopher never claimed humanity to be devoid of meaning, most in the atheistic scientific community embraced a meaningless universe since "meaning" carried as much empirical weight as fairies, the aether, and God. There even erupted a moral stance, still visible in internet forums dedicated to atheism today, that accepting this position was a chivalric sign of bravery and clear-thinking in contradistinction to the coddling, infantilizing nature of meaning-making religions. This brand of secular humanists could never market their position without condescension until science's PR poet Carl Sagan made his addendum. Now, one could marvel at just how insignificant our human lives are compared to the scope of the entire universe, but one must also admit that the resolution of a character's existential crisis: stargazing.

Halfway through Wes Anderson's new *Asteroid City*, Dinah Campbell (Grace Edwards), in a moment of confession, jokes that her mother is a victim of stargazing, as she is a star and makes a living by having others gaze at her. It's a sidereus barb from a child navigating the age in which a parent becomes a human and one must face a miniature death of God. Nearly every major character in Wes Anderson's filmography deals with their own little death of meaning (Max Fischer changes schools, Steve Zissou lets go of the shark), but none do so as explicitly as those in *Asteroid City*. Fittingly, then, this is also Anderson's most star-studded work yet, with many trade reports setting aside an entire paragraph just to list off the names. That said, the film does prioritize the story of Augie Steenback (Jason Schwartzman, whose character feels like a reprisal of *Rushmore*'s Astronomy Society founder, Max Fischer) and his kids who, in 1955, arrive in the tiny desert town of Asteroid City to attend a stargazing program for child prodigies (another *Rushmore* nod). It's here that Augie, a celebrated WWII photojournalist, finally mentions to the kids that their mother died three weeks ago. Meanwhile, Midge Campbell (Scarlett Johansson), single mother and renowned actress, arrives at her daughter Dinah's genius-affirming ceremony, but focuses only on her next role.

Also present in Asteroid City: more genius kids, a class trip, the US military, a lone mechanic, a motel manager who sells real estate from a vending machine, and some singing cowboys. The only thing that would make the town a more perfect '50s pastiche would be the arrival of an alien, so an alien arrives.

On top of all that, the whole thing is actually a play, complete with frequent interruptions to scenes of its creation and creators, which itself is actually a televised performance (of the *Playhouse 90* variety) hosted by Bryan Cranston. Anderson used a similar structure in *The French Dispatch*, but this is no mere anthology film. The black-and-white, Academy-ratio'd sequences of the play's creation compose a completely different film, one concerned with the East Coast theater world of method acting and its heroes and victims. The actors of the play sometimes walk into these sequences, where they discuss line changes, spoil later parts of the play, and reveal qualms about their parts. The playwright (Edward Norton, playing something between Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams), director (Adrien Brody, perhaps an Elia Kazan-type), and acting coach (Willem Dafoe, definitely Lee Strasberg) remind us of the postwar turn to the "true self" that defined both modern art and the modern search for meaning. Within the play itself there's yet another play, one that Augie and Midge flirt-rehearse together but that stops when Augie asks for the meaning behind one of his character's actions. Then, the play itself stops when the East Coast actor asks about the meaning behind the centerpiece. What happens when we seek after the meaning of life?

Of course, this is still a Wes Anderson movie, so all the existentialist and meta-modernist themes are packaged in a graphic design cartoon world with so much detail that it makes it impossible to read every sign or even mentally register every building. The set was built from the ground up (literally, as even the ground was covered with crop-friendly red dirt) in Chinchón, Spain, just as the studios of lore might have made. This production even included cast and crew living on-site, making for an amicable, efficient production like the midcentury troupe camps of John Ford or Ingmar Bergman. Chinchón had, in another life, been the location for Orson Welles's *The Immortal Story*, but Anderson's production took advantage of its infinite flatness to use as a blank canvas, filled with midcentury station wagons, camps, vending machines, diners, signage, and, in the distance, *Looney Tunes*-inspired Arizona mesas, complete with a puppet roadrunner that goes all but meep-meep. Production designer Adam Stockhausen used the high saturation of desert state postcards as inspiration for this living, breathing town, and Robert Yeoman, Anderson's go-to DP, complements the landscape beautifully, with planimetric compositions of robin egg blue skies and brick red deserts that feel miraculous in an age of darker and darker digital LUTs. And, though the actors are kooky enough on their own, costume designer Milena Canonero cements each character's image with multi-colored cowboy equipment, punchy bolo ties for Steve Carrell's businessman, and so-gaudy-it's-admirable patterned golf pants for Tom Hanks' character, who frankly cannot shut up about golf. If Anderson keeps picking these names as his go-to collaborators, it's likely

because he likes them, but it's also likely they're some of the best at what they do. And *Asteroid City* is, if nothing else, the greatest showcase of their talents.

That doesn't make this just another parodic parade of Anderson's nods to his own style. Here, rapid-fire dialogue may stop for an uncomfortable twenty seconds before a cut reveals that no punchline will save us from these characters' more serious monologues. Robert Yeoman uses shallow focus and Dutch angles to emphasize the strangeness of the East Coast theater world before we're abducted back to Kodak color safety (only for him to break a few Andersonisms there, too). And, in case one were to think that all of this means Anderson is pulling away from the qualities he's most known for, an original song by Wes inspires a singing cowboy moment — perhaps this writer's favorite of the many, many bits from the many, many characters of *Asteroid City*. This is neither the director *reacting to* nor *doubling down* on what the audience expects of him; art critics used to call what's happening here "stylistic evolution," or perhaps just "fun."

The alien ("played" by Jeff Goldblum) is meaning itself, of course; that's why it's so disruptive. That's why every character changes after it makes contact and why the actors involved in the play want to have its appearance spelled out. The meaning crisis induced by a secular scientific worldview would push for aliens (as Sagan pushed for SETI funding) as a way for humans to grapple with their own individual place in the universe and accede to its godlike vastness. Note the map-based language of"finding your place," "finding your way," or "being directionless" that's associated with this process; compare that with the language of "mapping the stars" and astronomical charts. The plastic arts underwent the same transformation around the same time, as meaning was no longer privileged as a collective narrative, but was inherent to the artist and viewer as individuals who must "make a journey" deep in the self to bring out a work's meaning. Anderson's *Asteroid City* beautifully plays with these modernist concerns while yanking away our maps to the stars. The aliens have been here a long time. **— ZACH LEWIS**

DIRECTOR: Wes Anderson; **CAST:** Jason Schwartzman, Scarlett Johansson, Tom Hanks, Tilda Swinton; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Focus Features; **IN THEATERS:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 44 min.

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THE FLASH

Andy Muschietti

Surviving the turnover of multiple directors, literal years of delays and reshoots, endless public troubles centered around its star, and even the wholesale scrapping of the current run of DC comics movies, *The Flash* has finally arrived to an audience that might not even care anymore. Whether or not that's too bad doesn't really matter, just as nothing that happens in this movie will matter to any future films, but ultimately that's to *The Flash*'s benefit — the low bar of expectations and shrug of a release mean that the film actually has the space to feel breezy and amusing in its very *okayness*.

Barry Allen (Ezra Miller) is the titular Flash, the fastest man alive after an accident with some chemicals and a lightning storm. He's fidgety and awkward and an annoying motormouth, but those are the least of his problems. More important is that his dad, Henry (Ron Livingston), is rotting in prison for the murder of Barry's mom, a crime Barry is certain dad didn't commit, and of course also the life-changing traumatic event that motivates Barry's crime-fighting ambitions. He even talks about it with his good buddy Batman (Ben Affleck, very clearly hoping that it's for the last time). Batman tells him not to dwell on the past, the scars that don't heal instead define us, blah blah, etc. etc. Forget about all that, says Barry, who reasons that if he can run fast enough, he can travel back in time to save his mother, and do so without any additional unexpected consequences.

Predictably, after his time-traveling shenanigans, Barry winds up

in an alternate present, slightly before he was gifted his powers, which is important because this new timeline's Barry still needs to get them too. Other Barry (also Miller) is an even more obnoxious moron than Regular Barry, probably because he still lives at home with his very nice, very alive, very not in-prison parents. Anyway, when Other Barry gets his powers, Regular Barry loses his, just in time for General Zod (Michael Shannon), the villain from Zack Snyder's now decade-old *Man of Steel*, to show up and demand that humanity turn over Superman, who seems to be MIA in this universe. Who, then, is going to help the Flashes stop this alien menace? A reasonable move is to turn to Batman for help, except here Batman is Michael Keaton again, and he doesn't have a clue who The Flash is.

It's genuinely shocking that *The Flash* is just charming and lively enough to make that mountain of franchise bullshit actually taste alright. (Both) Miller(s) is clever and twitchy in the role, and once the stakes are raised to actual jeopardy, all of that fluff suitably settles down. And even though the return of Keaton absolutely reeks of a gimmick, he gives a sincere, bona fide *performance* that reminds viewers why his is probably still the most beloved movie iteration of the Caped Crusader. The tonal and narrative whiplash of this conceit teeters on exhausting throughout, but it stays mostly on the right side of grating by being so consistently good-natured.

That is, until it all collapses in an absolutely dire third act, which mostly takes place in a bland CGI desert with a lot of bland CGI bad guys shooting laser beams at each other. Complaining that huge digitally created conflagrations are indistinguishable from video game cutscenes has long been a cliche, but this stretch of *The Flash* absolutely lives up to the legendary critique. It's even possible that Michael Shannon didn't do a single day of greenscreen work here, so obvious and omnipresent is his digital double. But the embarrassment doesn't end there: the grand finale is an insipid sop to fan service that goes so far as to include inside-baseball cameos from actors and movies that never even got made. This clunker of an ending isn't quite enough to undo *The Flash*'s easy early pleasures and brick the whole film, but viewers looking to avoid a headache would be wise to cut and run roughly 45 minutes before the film's end. — ***MATT LYNCH***

DIRECTOR: Andy Muschietti; **CAST:** Ezra Miller, Michael Keaton, Ben Affleck, Sasha Calle; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Warner Bros.; **IN THEATERS:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 2 hr. 24 min.

ELEMENTAL

Peter Sohn

Long the standard bearer in American animation, specializing in four-quadrant hits that thread the needle between entertaining small children and reducing their parents to tears, Pixar Animation Studios has had a rough last few years. With the output already diluted by shareholder-demanded but creatively unnecessary sequels, prequels, and whatever the hell *Lightyear* was supposed to be, the semi-autonomous, computer-animated division of Disney was hit especially hard by the pandemic. The hugely expensive, long-in-production films coming out of Emeryville, California, have been repeatedly treated as sacrifices to the streaming gods: *Soul*, *Luca*, and *Turning Red* all bypassed theaters and were sent straight to Disney+, further devaluing them as "content" meant to distract young viewers. Directed by Peter Sohn (*The Good Dinosaur*), *Elemental* is the first wholly original Pixar film to play theaters since *Onward*'s abbreviated run in the early days of Covid-19, and it arrives with the pedigree of having closed out this year's Cannes Film Festival. On the face of it, the film is a return to the original, character-driven stories of the late, halcyon days of *Inside Out* and *Coco*. However, its problems underscore a larger, more fundamental problem than too many spin-offs or a depreciation of the theatrical experience. With each new film, Pixar's storytelling is getting more graceless and obvious. The incorporation of extended metaphors has become increasingly tortured, putting plot in service of allegory rather than the other way around. In the past, what made these films so affecting was how discreetly they'd play on the viewers' emotions while speaking to universal truths; their lessons passing by undetected if you weren't particularly looking for them. But good luck missing the point here.

Set in Elemental City, a fantastical metropolitan populated by anthropomorphized versions of the four dominant elements that make up the planet — earth, wind, water, and fire — *Elemental* is, at its core, the tale of star-crossed lovers. We're first introduced to the Lumens, with Bernie (voiced by longtime Pixar story supervisor Ronnie del Carmen) and Cinder (Shila Ommi) arriving in Elemental City from "the old country." Literally walking-talking balls of gaseous flames trying to coexist alongside tree-like earth and ephemeral wind, the Lumens find assimilating to the new world particularly challenging in light of their volatility and the fact that simply leaning on the wrong object can set it ablaze. With Cinder heavily pregnant — as with most things in the film, it's best to not to think too long about how any of this is meant to work — the Lumens buy a home in the undesirable part of town which, over time, becomes a thriving shop they own and

operate. The neighborhood around it, meanwhile, becomes a booming cultural center for the fire community. Years later, as Bernie gets on in years, he dangles ownership of the shop — which specializes in punny, fire-related sundries — in front of his now adult daughter, Ember (Leah Lewis), who's poised to carry on the family business... if only she could keep her volcanic temper in check.

After blowing her top and destroying the basement of the building, Ember comes face-to-face with Wade Ripple (Mamoudou Athie), a deeply empathetic city inspector and "water-person" who was literally sucked up into the building's pipes and deposited in the Lumen family store. Prone to sobbing at the drop of a hat — water being an integral part of saline and all — Wade can't help but note copious code violations around the shop; he's compelled to dutifully document his findings and report the store for immediate closure, but he does feel *super* bad about it. What follows is a frenzied chase across Elemental City, with Ember, long reluctant to leave her own kind, forced to confront her prejudices and venture outside her insular bubble to try and save the family business. Yet the more time she spends around Wade, the more she comes to realize how much the world has to offer beyond her narrow experiences and the demands of her family, opening up new professional and, yes, even romantic possibilities.

Structurally, *Elemental* falls into the well-trod "what if animals/inanimate objects/spiritual & emotional constructs had developed their own intricate society?" formula favored by animated films, and so much of what passes for invention here is found in its unique world-building and capitalization on the constraints and opportunities inherent in the premise. The film makes considerable hay exploiting the physics and properties of the elements, such as Ember inadvertently transforming a parasol into a hot air balloon or Wade being able to covertly "deliver himself" to Ember with his mass dispersed across half a dozen flower arrangements in vases. Simply traversing this world as an open flame or a cumulus cloud presents constant logistical challenges and opportunities for physical comedy, and the film doesn't disappoint in that respect. Nor does its conception of Elemental City as a sprawling metropolis of glass skyscrapers, dirigibles, low-lying neighborhoods, and canals, with the film emphasizing vibrant colors and spatial depth. (*Elemental* is being released in select theaters in 3D, but it's fair to wonder whether that would ultimately prove redundant while also potentially dulling its frequently breathtaking color palette.)

Yet for all its visual splendor, there's something rather pat and even patronizing in the film's thinly veiled message about the othering of different ethnicities (pardon: different *elements*), especially as this subject matter was already explored relatively adroitly in Disney's own *Zootopia* less than a decade ago. The diversity of the vocal cast and the diffusion of its cultural signifiers precludes any one group from having too great a claim to being singled out. That said, the film doesn't exactly shy from references to the immigrant experience — arguably the most

touching moment in the film is an onscreen dedication to Sohn's late parents, who themselves immigrated from Korea. With its preoccupation about not dating "outside your element" (Ember's grandmother's deathbed request of her: "mary fire") and Bernie becoming incensed at the idea of fire culture being "watered down" (literally in this instance), it's all but impossible to not interpret the film as an earnest plea to move past our differences and bust down racial and ethnic divides.

Far be it for me to splash cold water on the notion of tolerance in these contentious times, but this point tends to run headlong into the film's own internal logic. Yes, we can appreciate that Ember's desire to honor her immigrant parents and preserve their culture might give her pause about moving out of the old neighborhood or dating someone outside her own community, but also, if she gets wet she will literally be extinguished and presumably die. Likewise, there's an admirable strain of wide-eyed liberalism in Wade trying to be part of Ember's world (even choking down all that fiery food!), and yet, if he and Ember cohabitate in a small room with poor ventilation, he will evaporate out of existence (we'll leave it to the science nerds to debate whether he should actually be transformed into vapor). One can applaud the film for combating bigotry while recognizing that a visit with the in-laws shouldn't be a death-defying proposition. Or that physical intimacy would function much the same as walking across a bed of hot coals (this is surely the only Disney animated film that features an oblique "just the tip" reference). *Elemental* is no doubt well-intentioned, but it remains deeply confused and belabored in its messaging and conception, working its way backwards from "can't we all just get along?" **— *ANDREW DIGNAN***

DIRECTOR: Peter Sohn; **CAST:** Leah Lewis, Mamoudou Athie, Catherine O'Hara; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Disney/Pixar; **IN THEATERS:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 43 min.

NOBODY'S HERO

Alain Guiraudie

From his early short films to his two breakout features, *Stranger by the Lake* (2013) and *Staying Vertical* (2016), Alain Guiraudie has long conveyed a peculiarly attuned sense of community and the various figures that comprise it. Whether it be the concentrated gay collectives of *Stranger by the Lake* and his 2001 mid-length masterpiece *That Old Dream That Moves*, or the more varied and drifting denizens of *Staying Vertical*, his films slyly sketch out the milieus that its main characters move through, lending them an air of sometimes friendly, sometimes foreboding mystery that only grows as traits and flaws are revealed.

Nobody's Hero continues this trend, largely for the better. Guiraudie's first feature in six years premiered in, of all places, the Panorama sidebar at the 2022 Berlin Film Festival, a notably lower-profile venue after the Cannes Competition berth that his previous film had secured. Since then, *Nobody's Hero* has seemed to have mostly disappeared, with this theatrical run from noted Guiraudie stalwart Strand Releasing appearing to mark its U.S. premiere. There's many possible explanations, but the most likely stems from what may be considered the questionable premise, which largely centers on a young Arab man, Sélim (Iliès Kadri), living on the streets of Clermont-Ferrand, who is suspected of being involved in a terrorist attack in the French city. He, like everyone else, is seen through the partly suspicious, partly sympathetic eyes of Médéric (Jean-Charles Clichet), a slightly schlubby computer programmer who juggles this rapidly escalating situation with his fumbling courtship of Isadora (Noémie Lvovsky), an older married sex worker.

These twin obsessions with sex and death, a hallmark of Guiraudie's cinema, reach an early apotheosis in Médéric and Isadora's first encounter in her usual hotel room, where orgiastic pleasure quickly gets stifled by the first news reports of the carnage; when her husband barges in, our hero pleads that "life doesn't have to stop for a terrorist attack." That canny blend of hilarity and discomfort — the many interrupted sexual encounters laced throughout *Nobody's Hero* all register as varying degrees of mortifying — comes to typify the odd charm of the film, which largely takes pains to satirize its characters' reactions to the general state of suspicion and hostility in both arenas rather than terrorism or racism itself.

One could of course argue that the difference between the two is negligible, but Guiraudie's touch is too assured for that, with some expert modulations of rhythm to ensure that neither of the two plotlines feels too cumbersome. Opting for 1.85:1 after the magnificent Scope photography of his more recent work,

Guiraudie harnesses a great deal from Médéric's penchant for jogging, with his bobbing neon-green outline frequently ushering in a shift in focus, even as Clichet's wonderfully nonplussed expressions establish a baseline tone that carries the day. *Nobody's Hero* is ultimately a little messier than the creeping precision of *Stranger by the Lake* or the controlled madness of *Staying Vertical*, but the character work alone, between, say, the elderly hotel concierge and his young teenage assistant, or among the occupants of Médéric's apartment building, gives this an air of distinction far beyond what its heretofore tepid reception suggests. The ending is as much a lark as anything else, abrupt yet entirely fitting, where little is resolved and yet everything that needs to be said is captured in one ineffable image. ***— RYAN SWEN***

DIRECTOR: Alain Guiraudie; **CAST:** Jean-Charles Clichet, Noémie Lvovsky, Renaud Rutten; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Strand Releasing; **IN THEATERS:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 40 min.

EXTRACTION 2

Sam Hargrave

Like your sainted grandmother almost certainly used to say, there's nothing better than an insipidly violent piece of trash to restore your faith in cinema. *Extraction 2* is exactly the kind of movie she was talking about. Make no mistake: the script is mostly trash, the performances are merely adequate, it's overlong and expository, and the whole thing is mostly a clothesline for action scenes. But what action scenes these are.

Let's get the junk out of the way first. If you saw the first *Extraction*, you'd probably remember Tyler Rake (Chris Hemsworth), the exquisitely named master operator and nigh-unstoppable killing machine. When last we saw Tyler, he'd taken a few bullets and fallen off a bridge into a river in Mumbai, through which he'd been tearing a swath of destruction in the process of rescuing some kid or something, who cares. Having been rescued by his fellow mercenaries — brother-and-sister team Nik (Golshifteh Farahani) and Yaz (Adam Bessa) — before being miraculously restored to life and methodically returned to (mostly) peak condition, he's about to enjoy his retirement in the middle of nowhere with his chickens.

But not so fast — a shady dude named Alcott (Idris Elba) shows up one day with a proposition. *One last job.* The client is, absurdly, Tyler's estranged wife, Mia (Olga Kurylenko). Mia's sister is, even more absurdly, the wife of a Georgian cartel leader who's holding her and their children against their will in a Russian prison so as to "protect" them. Yikes! Tyler, Nik, and Yas are gonna go in and snatch them from the prison and bring them home safe. It's so stupid it just might work.

That initial extraction sequence comes about 25 minutes into this overstuffed behemoth, and it is one of the most truly

delightful litanies of bodily harm ever put in front of your eyeballs. A 21-minute, faux-single-take monster that begins in a jail cell, moves through a full-on prison riot, turns into a car chase, and finally exhausts itself with a massive runaway train vs. helicopter extravaganza. Tyler kills multiple people with a riot shield. He jams a massive metal spike into a guy's neck, but only after nearly ripping the guy's hand in fucking half (so sick!). He beats up a bunch of dudes *while on fire*. He shoots down multiple helis with a light machine gun. And that's only the beginning. In later sequences you will witness Tyler Rake kill a guy by crushing him with free weights, shooting a guy on a motorcycle with a grenade launcher — and that's setting aside the literally hundreds he merely shoots or stabs. There's a part where he single-handedly decimates a small airfield. There will be people that say this is too much or that it becomes monotonous. Those people are assholes who hate fun, so don't listen to them and block their number.

Director and longtime stunt performer Sam Hargrave knows exactly how to deliver jolt after jolt to your lizard brain. The action is superbly choreographed. The aforementioned 21-minute "oner" may not be seamless, but it is ingeniously strung together. The violence is bloody and graphic, and the whole endeavor is dedicated to the glee of watching bodies get maimed. The only thing out there that's on this level formally is, of course, the *John Wick* series. But those films are elegant and elaborate and gorgeous; they're sleekly loaded with metatext and humor.

Extraction 2 is, like Rake himself, a giant blunt-force killing machine with absolutely nothing on its mind — well, nothing good anyway. There's a boring thread about Rake's past with his ex-wife, the death of their child, and his unwillingness to get close to people. You can skip those parts. Instead, just keep going back to the part where he annihilates a room full of bad guys with the shape charge he also uses to blow the lock on a steel door. They should make one of these every year so that by the time *Extract10n* comes out the whole movie is just one long single-take action sequence with no talking. God I love this. **— *MATT LYNCH***

DIRECTOR: Sam Hargrave; **CAST:** Chris Hemsworth, Golshifeh Farahani, Tornike Gogrichiani; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Netflix; **STREAMING:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 2 hr. 3 min.

MAGGIE MOORE(S)

John Slattery

Jon Hamm and Tina Fey, two of the most beloved television actors of the 21st century, have been orbiting each other for so long that it's a little surprising they haven't shared more screen time together. Hamm famously appeared in a multi-episode arc of *30 Rock* as a love interest to Fey's Liz Lemon, and has reportedly been cast in the upcoming *Mean Girls: The Musical* film version that Fey has adapted from her stage play, but it does feel like the two would have worked together more by this point. With

HAPPER'S COMET

Tyler Taormina

"There's a casual surrealism to the endeavor, perhaps not a surprise to anyone who saw *Ham on Rye*, with its strange central conceit. Gradually, a number of people begin putting on rollerblades and quietly exiting their homes, as if drawn to some unknown beacon. Indeed, this is a film of apparitions, the mundane suburban milieu rendered otherworldly and ghostly. It's all the more lovely, then, when Taormina ends his film with a series of embraces, various couples enmeshed in a cornfield and each other's bodies. Here, finally, is a concrete, tactile recognition of human interconnectedness. Like a mysterious dream that begins to dissipate upon waking, *Happer's Comet* feels like stumbling around and blindly reaching out in the dark, and the sweet waves of relief at finding someone still next to you. It's a deeply beautiful piece of work." **— *DANIEL GORMAN*** *[Originally published as part of InRO's Berlinale 2022 coverage.]*

DIRECTOR: Tyler Taormina; **CAST:** Grace Berlino, Dan Carolan, Brandon Cassanova; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Factory 25; **IN THEATERS:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 2 min.

their up-for-anything attitudes and dependable comedic timing, the actors would have been (in a perfect world) a modern-day Tracy and Hepburn pairing. It comes as no surprise, then, that the best parts of *Maggie Moore(s)* are the scenes where Hamm's widower police chief, Jordan Sanders, and Fey's divorcee, Rita Grace, attempt to navigate a new relationship together in their early fifties, working through their collective neurosis and trepidations. Both performers expertly convey vulnerability and self-doubt, each recognizing that they're standing in their own way of happiness and love. Regrettably, this is a mere subplot of what's an otherwise overplotted and manic crime caper — a sweet middle-aged romance being crowded out by assorted murder-for-hires, Neo-Nazis, deaf assassins, and pedophiles.

Presumably taking inspiration from the part in *The Terminator* where Arnold Schwarzenegger works his way through the phonebook, killing a couple of unlucky Sarah Connors before arriving at the correct one (a title card at the beginning of this film which informs us that "some of this actually happened..." seems dubious), the eponymous Maggie Moores refer to two dead women, each brutally murdered by the towering deaf and dumb contract killer Kosco (Happy Anderson), hired by one of the women's husbands, Jay (Micah Stock). Jay is an over-leveraged sub shop franchisee so short on cash that he buys discount (and expired) meat and cheese from the criminally-connected sex offender Tommy T (Derek Basco). For reasons too vague for the film to explain, Jay unwittingly comes into possession of child pornography meant for Tommy T, which has somehow fallen into the hands of Jay's estranged wife, Maggie (Louisa Krause), who's understandably horrified. She not only refuses to give the photos back to her soon-to-be ex, but even threatens to call the cops on him. Being squeezed by both Tommy T and his own wife, Jay hires Kosco to retrieve the photos, only for the lumbering henchman — who communicates entirely by scribbling messages on a legal pad which he immediately shreds — to take the assignment a bit too far, incinerating Maggie and leaving her smoldering corpse in the desert.

Convinced that the cops are closing in on him, Jay's next big idea is to send Kosco to kill a second, wholly uninvolved woman also named Maggie Moore (Mary Holland) who's living in the same town, in order to sow chaos and throw the police off his scent. And though it works, it also opens up several additional pathways of wacky criminality and malfeasance, introducing us to an adulterous husband (Christopher Denham) and a jealous white nationalist (Tate Ellington). Left to untangle this mess is Hamm's police chief and his sardonic deputy, Reddy (Nick Mohammed of *Ted Lasso* fame), who can't quite scratch the itch that something isn't adding up even as the case appears to tie itself with a neat little bow. And then of course there's Rita — Jay and Maggie's nosey next-door neighbor — whom Jordan has a thing for, but he's letting the feelings he still harbors for his own dead wife prevent him from moving on to someone new.

Frankly, it's a lot to keep straight, and director John Slattery (best known for playing Hamm's *Mad Men* drinking buddy, Roger Sterling) appears to be overwhelmed by the assignment. The film regularly loses track of characters and prominent storylines while continuing to accumulate new subplots as it moves along, like a hoarder rummaging through an estate sale. At only 99 minutes, *Maggie Moore(s)* is overstuffed, forcing it to rush payoffs or simply infer outcomes for some of its dozen-plus supporting characters. Even more off-putting is its tonal disarray. We get lingering shots of charred corpses still sizzling, splattery brain matter framed against plate glass windows, allusions to child sexual exploitation alongside what can only be described as a Nazi dungeon decorated with concentration camp uniforms and "1488" posters. Yet the overarching vibe is one that unsubtly elbows the viewer in the ribs, almost as if the film were saying, "get a load of all these losers." The grievances are picayune, the perpetrators are visibly out of their depth, and the film keeps getting caught up in sitcom digressions (there's even a running gag about Hamm scolding Mohammed for speaking in clichés and making barely off-color jokes at crime scenes). Charitably, one could ascribe the Coen brothers' influence onto the film, although theirs is such a *sui generis* alchemy of deadpan comedy and horrifying violence; Slattery never comes close to achieving a similar balance.

One wishes *Maggie Moore(s)* had simply dropped all the dumb criminals and scheming to focus on the relationship between Hamm and Fey's characters, which is plenty interesting in its own right. He's gun-shy and guarded; she tends towards self-deprecation in order to obscure her fear of commitment. The scenes between them are understated and hopeful, yet both hold back out of fear of getting hurt, which lends their

interactions a mysterious tension that keeps them from becoming treacly. For all the sprawl and mayhem of multiple dead wives and bloody shootouts, the real messiness of the film — the stuff that makes you brace for the timebomb at its center to spectacularly go off — is watching these two actors awkwardly pull down the walls they've built around themselves. It's not as conventionally thrilling or performatively edgy as all the surrounding material, but it's the only part of the film which feels true to itself. ***— ANDREW DIGNAN***

DIRECTOR: John Slattery; **CAST:** Jon Hamm, Tina Fey, Nick Mohammed; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Screen Media Films; **IN THEATERS/STREAMING:** June 16; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 39 min.

TIME OF MOULTING

Sabrina Martens

"Beyond the star-studded premieres, the red carpets, the haute couture, and the million dollar acquisition deals, film festivals (ideally) exist to give a platform to the kinds of movies otherwise neglected (or actively shunned) by the monoculture. *Time of Moulting* is one of those films — a small, quiet, discomforting gem destined to be ignored by all but the most intrepid filmgoer, forever threatening to fall through the cracks of our collective film culture. It feels like a precious object, something unique and in need of special handling. It's also, it must be noted, an absolutely terrifying film. *Time of Moulting* is horror of a unique but palpable variety, capturing every parent's nightmare: the fear that wrong choices can doom a child to a life of emotional turmoil.". ***— DANIEL GORMAN***

[Originally published as part of InRO's Fantasia Fest 2020 coverage.]

DIRECTOR: Sabrina Mertens; **CAST:** Zelda Espenschied, Miriam Schiller, Freya Kreutzkam; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Dekanalog; **IN THEATERS:** June 6; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 22 min.

SAFE PLACE

Juraj Lerotić

Suicide narratives are dominated by two extremes: the undermined sense that all knowledge about the person who has died is now a hopelessly incomplete, even false kind of knowledge, and the deterministic profile of the person that can be pieced together by the medical paper trail they leave behind. Juraj Lerotić's *Safe Place* is crafted in a way that directly addresses, then evades, both of these problems; it exists in the conditional tense rather than the wake of a suicide attempt. At first, the film appears to be up to something much more familiar: In a flurry of real-time activity, Bruno (Lerotić) breaks down an apartment door to reach his unresponsive brother, Damir (Goran Marković). Estimating he has arrived hours after Damir's attempt, he calls for help, and paramedics arrive, cops arrive, the brothers' mother arrives, and each brings a new wave of questions. Bruno, unable to accompany Damir in an ambulance, keeps the pace up by running on foot to the hospital. If Lerotić seems to be engineering a study in tension, he quickly dissuades this notion not long after: following an introduction to the diagnostic distrust of medical professionals, the first extended meeting between Bruno and Damir cleaves through any notion that we are merely watching a ticking-clock, social-realist drama.

Safe Place will not be a study of psychology, tragedy, recovery, or family dynamics. In a single moment, what we're seeing is reconfigured — you could call it a response to Camus' provocative statement that "an act like this is prepared within the silence of the heart, as is a great work of art." That is, it takes the question of Damir's motivation, which Marković plays as an unutterable struggle — most of the time, the actor projects a rigid calm, and answers any question, more often than not, "Okay..." — and deems the entire notion as inextricable from what else could yet occur beyond the attempt. Rather than a form of time that might explain Damir's situation as a problem (like flashbacks), Lerotić's film unfolds as a series of implicated presents — episodes that restage a form of crisis in other locations, with Damir joined by his mother and brother. As the Bruno and Damir meeting ensures, we know the trajectory of what will happen; it seems fixed, but as Lerotić's intervention suggests, the sum of the consequences of each potential action taken by Bruno and his mother must still be accounted for.

Given the exponential number of paths that this film has access to, it's worth noting that Lerotić prefers to keep things as contained as possible. The film sticks with the trio, and aside

from onscreen figures reached by phone, admits no one else into this universe. Even though the meeting between Damir and Bruno suggests that anything is possible, that no rule can't be broken in *Safe Place*'s presentation, this never comes close to happening. Most of the film is delivered in carefully measured doses of dialogue, destabilizing gestures, and a dichotomy of images: interiors appear to us as if covered in a gray mist, while exteriors pop with near-fluorescent greens. In other words, there's no mistaking *Safe Place* for a problem-message movie. But some of those isolated gestures are cleverly placed. Pressed by an investigator about why he stores a gun in his apartment, Bruno answers that it is merely a prop — he works in TV — which neutralizes the situation. Similarly, faced with the trial of enduring a waiting room after a suicide attempt, with concern written on his face and blood on his shirt, in a single motion, he finds a way to reverse the problem, an elegant illustration of the film's shape and its suppleness with artifice — like a more desperate version of Tilda Swinton's handkerchief inversion in *Memoria*.

But it would also be outsized praise to say Lerotić is working at a level where we can trust every one of his moves. That the film's premise is apparently based on an event that impacted his family — to the point where it declares that names, outside the trio, have *not* been changed — grants him much good will. But despite allowing such grand and changeable parameters, by the end, matters dissipate into a final image of nostalgic cliche. If this film is a resurrection, it's by turns a startling and intelligent one — but one that ultimately fails to seize the possibilities of its venture like similarly inclined time-splitters *Je t'aime, je t'aime* and *Peppermint Candy*. Still, that a first feature invites such comparisons at all is a testament to the film's gambit, which, at the very least, marks Lerotić as a director interested less in parcelling out memories and more in delving into the inseparable strata of past, present, and future. ***— MICHAEL SCOULAR***

DIRECTOR: Juraj Lerotić; **CAST:** Snjezana Sinovcic Siskov, Goran Markovic, Juraj Lerotić; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Klassiki; **STREAMING:** June 15; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 45 min.

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