



Michelle Williams in *Land of Plenty*

## PP&P

### *Land of Plenty*

review by M. Faust

At a time when the status of immigrants in our society is getting so much attention, it's worth recalling that the history of Hollywood, which for better and worse is the mythology of the modern era, is a history shaped largely by immigrants. The business was built by studio heads in the 1920s and 1930s who were at most first-generation, and its creative side in the important years of the pre-World War II era was shaped by a flood of creative talent fleeing Europe.

For my money, there was no better observer of America in mid-century than Billy Wilder, that German emigrant whose films reflected a relentless study of his adopted home. Through the years, some of the most fascinating films about America have been made by filmmakers who were not born here, from Milos Forman to Ang Lee.

I would not go so far as to call *Land of Plenty*, by the German filmmaker Wim Wenders, a great film about America. But it is a film about this country in its present condition, made by an outside observer who loves it and frets over its difficulties.

*Land of Plenty* was written and produced in a short period of time to take advantage of an unexpected hiatus in 2003 when the film Wenders was working on temporarily shut down due to financing problems. Concerned about "poverty, paranoia and patriotism," Wenders concocted a story that would let him explore these issues in the conflict between two characters too bound together to ignore each other.

Lana (Michelle Williams) grew up mostly in Africa and the Middle East, where her parents are missionaries. She has returned to the US for the first time in more than a decade to find her mother's estranged brother Paul (John Diehl).

Since the events of 9/11, former Special Services officer Paul has also started to become estranged from reality, driving around Los Angeles in a beat-up van that he has outfitted as a "freelance" homeland security operation. Driving around listening to a steady diet of right-wing radio, he spies on anyone who strikes him as suspicious (i.e., dark-skinned), hoping to find a terrorist operation he can thwart.

When Lana makes contact with him, Paul avoids her, preferring to remain inside the shell he has woven for himself. She senses

a way to reach him when she witnesses the death of a homeless Pakistani man she met briefly at the homeless shelter where she has been staying and working. By virtue of his head garb, the man had become the focus of Paul's harmless but steady attention, and Lana convinces him to help her return the body to his brother, who lives in a small town up in Death Valley.

I'm a bit reluctant to describe these two characters in too much detail, because to do so would make them reek of cliché: Lana is a Christian who believes that the best preaching comes from doing good works rather than talking about them; Paul is a Vietnam veteran suffering the effects of defoliant exposure. Overly familiar as they may sound, they come alive onscreen thanks to strong performances and intelligent scripting. (The screenplay, based on Wenders' story, was written by Michael Meredith, who made an excellent film called *Three Days of Rain*, updating some Chekov stories to modern Cleveland. I saw it at the Montreal Film Festival in 2003, after which it sadly seems to have disappeared.)

Despite a stagily dramatic climax and somewhat mawkish coda, *Land of Plenty* succeeds in small details. Like his countryman Werner Herzog, Wenders has an eye for out-of-the-way American locations, and he gets a surprising beauty out of video images transferred to 35mm film. (He says the secret is in post-production work on the color correction.) As always, he loves to shoot on the road, and there are moments here that recall the settings and moods of *Wings of Desire* and *Paris Texas*.

The online magazine *Salon* reports that *Land of Plenty* had trouble finding distribution because of a buzz after its premiere screening at the Venice Film Festival that it was an anti-American diatribe. It's blatantly ridiculous that Wenders, one of the cinema's great humanists, would ever make a film that was a diatribe about anything; The most negative emotion he seems capable of is disappointment. (Is there any film that makes you want to hug strangers more than *Wings of Desire*?) But the fact remains that this imperfect but commendable little film has been all but orphaned in the marketplace. **It will play in Buffalo at the Emerging Cinema screen at the Market Arcade from Friday through Tuesday only.**

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Diego Cantano and Daniel Miranda in *Duck Season*

## BIRDS OF A FEATHER, BRIEFLY

### *Duck Season*

review by George Sax

Fernando Eimbcke came to his debut as a feature-film director from a career making music videos and commercials, but you'd never know it from his first film, *Duck Season* (*Temporada De Patos*). It's an unhurried, soft-impact, subtly suggestive work that stands in contrast to countless other such debuts and to most of the other films on the market in recent years, for that matter.

As it begins, in Mexico City, at the door of an apartment in one of those high-rise, reinforced concrete monuments to modernist architecture's felonious past, a mother is bidding goodbye to her 14-year-old son Flama (Daniel Miranda) and his pal Moko (Diego Cantano) late on a Sunday morning. Before she can get away, they extort money for pizza and Cokes from her in return for promises of good conduct.

Once they're alone, they joyfully contemplate a day of uninterrupted, unsupervised video-game playing and gluttony. But their day will not go as they so happily anticipated. It will be a Sunday of annoying interruptions, unusual diversions, sobering memories and revelations and challenging prospects. And some dope-fueled reveries too.

Eimbcke has infused *Duck Season* with a tone of sympathetic, but somewhat distanced, amusement. He has largely succeeded in maintaining its delicately calibrated pace and feeling. (*Duck Season*, which he also wrote, won 11 Ariels, the Mexican equivalent of Oscars, including for script and direction.)

Soon after it begins, the boys' insulated recreation is violated by the intrusion of Rita (Danny Perea, also an Ariel winner), a 16-year-old neighbor of Flama who wants to use his mother's oven to bake a cake. After he reluctantly agrees, their video game contest is interrupted by a power failure. Their unruffled reaction suggests this is a common occurrence in Mexico City.

Shifting their attention to the other major attraction of the afternoon, they phone for their pizza from a place with a 30-minute-delivery-time guarantee. When Flama's watch doesn't agree with the delivery guy's—who has to climb eight flights in the absence of a working elevator—a standoff ensues: He won't leave without payment, and Flama

wants a free pizza. Meanwhile, Rita is busy in the kitchen with her own cake-timing problems, having enlisted Moko's questionable help. As these two engage in a tentative, semi-romantic exploration, Flama and Ulises, the pizza guy (Enrique Arreola), are establishing a truce after a briefly contentious interlude.

Eimbcke has said he was surprised to find support for his "black and white film in which nothing happens." (Alfonso Cuarón, the celebrated director of *Y Tu Mama Comien*, is distributing it in the US in conjunction with Warner Independent Pictures.) And little of conventional moment does happen. But during this Sunday afternoon in the apartment, these four establish real, if temporary, connections with each other, and perhaps new ideas about themselves. Eimbcke gently plays with their tentative interactions to create what is primarily a subdued but engaging cinematic chamber piece. There are developments in *Duck Season*, but they're within the mood shifts and the rather oblique insights.

A little like Cuarón's *Y Tu Mama*, this movie is about associations of limited duration and longer relationships, and about the hard-to-define impacts and changes both can have on individuals. It's also about youthful spirit and youth's disappointments.

By the picture's end, Flama and Moko are facing a crucial change in their relationship. Eimbcke doesn't lay much emphasis on this and neither do the kids. They mark this realization with studied, boyish nonchalance, but the unremarked feelings are recognizably present. All of the members of this temporary quartet are going to be reflecting on uncertain, unsatisfactory circumstances, but the movie only insinuates this prospect.

Comparisons are all too often glib exercises, but it may be minimally acceptable to call *Duck Season* a little like a combination of work by Jean Renoir and Jim Jarmusch, with a little stoner magic realism added in. It's also very much an individual creation, of course. Eimbcke has worked it out with a blend of deliberateness and delicacy and infused it with a wistful humor. It has an unusually modulated resonance and an artfully delayed impact.

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