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FILMCLIPS

SWEET JESUS

In the finale of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Judas chastises Jesus for bad timing: "If you'd come today you could have reached a whole nation... Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication." This could serve as the launching point for Greg Sterlace's new film, *Sweet Jesus*, which is more ambitious and provocative than his previous efforts, *Ross and Gwen* and *Failure*. The film screens at the Market Arcade Film and Arts Centre on Saturday, September 2nd, at 7pm.



Sweet Jesus depicts a visit by Jesus (bowing to public misperception, he now accepts "Christ" as his last name) to Buffalo when certain parties are monopolizing Christianity, and the population has forgotten the importance of spirituality in religion. Sterlace, known locally as a musician and as the host of a cable access show, and his co-writer, Paula Wachowiak, mine humor from Jesus's efforts to convince area residents of his identity. But soon enough, the son of God, backed by new apostles (all women this time), embarks on a media campaign to remind people of the true meaning of his teachings.

In the title role, Richard Lambert, who carries the weight of the entire film on his shoulders, is a revelation in an extremely difficult role. Tall and paunchy, Lambert portrays Jesus as a likable fellow with a touch of everyman sincerity, reminiscent of Gary Cooper. I laughed at Jesus's gentle banter with His Father, and found myself rooting for him on his mission. I also laughed at his encounter with a born-again Christian (Frank Giambra), and his admonishment of a televangelist (J. Saxman).

Other roles are filled by artists, oddballs and misfits from Sterlace's show. Todd Mattina is a charismatic Satan, and Lukia Costello is surprisingly moving as a lost soul who finds temporary salvation. I liked many of the bit players, too numerous to mention in a film with so many speaking parts. Several local performers contributed to the soulful soundtrack, and Richard Wicka's cinematography nicely captures the Queen City despite the limitations of video.

Although it tackles serious—and potentially controversial—issues, the film's gentle nature and upbeat message reminded me of both *Oh, God!* and *A Miracle on 34th Street*. The lack of any real art direction makes for a theatrical, rather than cinematic, experience, but this homegrown entertainment earns the support of its home town. Hopefully, Sterlace and company will spread the word beyond our neck of the Rust Belt.

—greg lamberson

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THE QUIET

Sitting through *The Quiet*, I couldn't help thinking of the films it tries to emulate. There's the high school cruelty of *Carrie*, the shocking frankness of a Neil LaBute drama (at least before LaBute started re-making horror flicks like this week's *The Wicker Man*), the father-daughter incest of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* and the ticking clock of *High Noon*. Unfortunately, this excruciatingly slow movie more closely resembles sleazy soap opera junk like *Poison Ivy* and *Two Moon Junction*. It is pretentious exploitation masquerading as authentic fare, full of Big Lies and Bigger Secrets. Unlike Todd Solondz's *Happiness*, it seeks to titillate with the very depravity it pretends to condemn.



Camilla Belle stars as Dot, a loner deaf girl sentenced to live with suburbanite relatives after the deaths of her parents. Belle held my attention whenever she was on screen; it's too bad such a strong performance is wasted in such a trashy movie. Under her observant gaze, what begins as a drama devolves into a sexual tease, then makes a dull turn into murder thriller territory in the laughable final act.

Elisha Cuthbert, who graduated from the TV series *24* to crap like *House of Wax* and *The Girl Next Door*, plays Dot's bitchy cousin, who gets most of the naughty dialogue. She's pretty good here, and her predilection for potty-mouthed roles assures her a future on Cinemax. Hal Hartley veteran Martin Donovan plays Cuthbert's father, who confuses the roles of mother and daughter. Even an actor as thoughtful as Donovan is unable to make this dad sympathetic after we see him in bed with his daughter, a scene that made me want to bolt the theater. Edie Falco, who's already perfected the role of pathetic hausfrau on *The Sopranos*, plays the mother, whose painkiller addiction blinds her to her husband's perversity.

Director Jamie Babbit cut her teeth helming TV series like *Alias* and *Gilmore Girls*, and I fail to see how this is a step up for her. I don't understand why anyone would want to make a movie like this, or who would want to see it. The middle-aged men who attend movies like this alone are likely to be disappointed that Falco exhibits the only significant nudity.

—greg lamberson



www.artvoice.com



LOVE

The title may strike you as inappropriate for a gritty drama about a multinational cast of characters plying various illegal trades in the outskirts of Manhattan. Even worse, you might assume it to be ironic if you read any of the numerous reviews that compare it to *Pulp Fiction* for its multiple perspectives and looping time line.

But *Love* is, in fact, about that emotion, albeit in unconventional forms. This second feature from Vlado Nikolic, formerly director of an independent television network in Belgrade and now a professor of film in New York City, draws on his own status as an immigrant to America in shaping his various characters' experiences with assimilation and the lack thereof. More universally, though, his film's theme is the of-

ten noble emotions that give rise to some of the worst human actions.

The central character is Vanya (Sergej Trifunovic), a rare instance of a true Yugoslav: Abandoned by his parents after birth and raised in an orphanage, he has no idea if he is a Serb, Croat or Muslim. His love of country turns sour during the civil war, where he served as a special forces soldier. He takes advantage of an opportunity to escape to the United States, but there is a price: His patron requires him to work as an assassin.

Love radiates outward from him to encompass a German doctor whose humanitarian dedication met its match in witnessing Serbian atrocities; an American cop who wants to be a writer but feels tied to the heritage of his father; a French drag artiste whose entire life is a fabrication; an Italian gangster desperate to save the life of his critically ill wife, and others. At some point after we have been visually introduced to each character, a narrator provides us with his or her background information, giving a pithy sketch that often runs counter to our expectations: One of the nastier characters, for instance, has a secret fondness for Mexican soap operas.

Some reviewers (usually the same ones who compare it to Tarantino) have criticized *Love* for favoring visual style and structural virtuosity over emotion. Yet despite a framing device that seems designed to distance us from the characters, they had a way of getting under my skin anyway. The story's twists and turns are actually its weakest elements: Revisiting the same events from multiple perspectives adds little to anything but the film's length. But Nikolic has a keen eye for locations, and his placement of his multinational cast in Manhattan but not of it renders another unexpected layer of emotion.

Love will be screened next Wednesday and Thursday at the Emerging Cinemas screen at the Market Arcade Film and Arts Center.

—m. faust



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