



Aaron Eckhart and Josh Hartnett in *The Black Dahlia*

PURPLE NOIR

The Black Dahlia

review by George Sax

Three decades ago, Brian DePalma made a film called *Obsession*. In a telling way, the title sums up one of the driving themes in the director's work. DePalma's movies, particularly those in the 1970s and 1980s, like *Carrie*, *The Fury* and *Blow Out*, involved deeply compulsive behavior, and sometimes they seemed to be about the director's obsessions as well as the characters'. Late in the 1970s, critic Pauline Kael, one of DePalma's admirers, conceded that "he's uncommitted to anything except successful manipulation."

That commitment must have run deep. DePalma filled screens with teasing elevations of audiences' anxious expectations and hopes, and then gleefully exploded brutal surprises that deflated their hopes and sympathies. He practiced a kind of violent, genre-busting moviemaking of ironic cruelty. He wasn't great at coherent narrative, but he did provide movie thrill rides whose resolution could leave you amused at your own thwarted anticipation.

DePalma moved on to other things as time passed—most notably, the Vietnam War exposé *Casualties of War*—but his passion for filmmaking seemed to be most engaged by filmmaking's sensuous possibilities and the blunt-force alienation of audience identification with the characters.

Over the last 15 years, DePalma's star-director status has declined, especially after that late-1980s bomb, *Bonfire of the Vanities*. His latest film, *The Black Dahlia*, is exceedingly unlikely to redeem his reputation. It echoes some of his earlier ideas and tricks, but in this one they almost always seem out of place, and his timing and aesthetic sense are badly out of whack.

The movie is an adaptation of James Ellroy's very popular 1987 novel of the same title, an imaginative recycling and elaboration of the meagre and grisly facts surrounding the unsolved LA murder in 1947 of a young woman, Betty Short, nicknamed *The Black Dahlia* by the sensationalist press, probably in an allusion to the 1946 film *The Blue Dahlia* (which was written by Raymond Chandler, one of Ellroy's forebears in hard-boiled California detective fiction).

Josh Hartnett is Dwight, a young LA police detective and former boxer (he owes his rapid advancement in large part to his pugilistic skills) who's investigating the Dahlia case with his senior partner Lee (Aaron Eckhart), another police department boxer. Except that other crimes, large and small, seemingly unconnected to the Dahlia murder, keep getting in his way. And Lee is becoming increasingly nervous and fixated on a soon-to-be-released incarcerated felon.

Dwight's situation is made even more embattled by the platonic menage he's become part of with Lee and his live-in girlfriend Kay (Scarlett Johansson), and the increasing possibility that she may not want to remain just a buddy to Dwight.

There's a lot more going on and DePalma may not have been able to process it all, or care about it. Josh Friedman's script is certainly an important part of the problem; it almost certainly made a hash of Ellroy's well-regarded novel. The movie is a welter of barely (or not at all) comprehensible characters, clues and narrative doglegs. It seems to have been written by someone who was overwhelmed by the challenge. I don't remember one line of smart, penetrating dialogue, de rigueur in this kind of effort.

DePalma may have had no hand in this initial failure. He was hired after David Fincher walked away from the project. But there's no evidence he did anything to mitigate the script's crippling flaws. On the evidence, he seems to have enhanced them. (One of the more minor but instructive indications is the lavishly laid-out lesbian bar where one scene is set. It's about as authentic-looking as Cecil B. DeMille's depiction of Biblical Canaan.) And while I haven't read the book, I'm willing to place at least a small wager that Ellroy's ending is rather different than Friedman and DePalma's violent but stilted denouement.

DePalma must have decided to create another deliriously trippy and operatically bloody cinematic experience, but he was working against the grain of the material. It required the development of menace, intrigue and the remnants of social and moral critique in the screenplay that must remain from Ellroy's book.

DePalma has let his cast down badly. Johansson, playing a character that's scarcely more than a few careless brushstrokes, looks and sounds like she's at loose ends. Hartnett, who is in every scene, as well as on a voice-over narration, can't get over the awfulness of the script and direction. For the last five to six years, he's been showing glimpses of serious leading-man potential. He's more than attractive enough, but he seems willing to play against that beauty with a deceptively effective, unemphatic style. It's to no avail here, and he's still stranded on the cusp of potentiality.

A fellow at the journalist's preview in Buffalo, a sophisticated veteran, broke out in laughter two or three times during the movie. I saw his point ("People paid money to make this thing!" he said afterward) but I don't think it's funny enough to recommend to any but the most committed connoisseurs of misbegotten movies.

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