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# film reviews



Déborah Francois and Jérémie in *L'Enfant*.

## LIFE WITH FATHER *L'Enfant*

review by George Sax

The moral improvements wrought by the unexpected obligations of childcare are a thematic staple of literature and drama. George Eliott's gloomy 19th-century novel, *Silas Marner*, Damon Runyon's comic 1930s racetrack story, *Little Miss Marker*, and this year's winner of the best foreign film Oscar, the South African entry, *Tsotsi*, all revolve around children redeeming the blighted lives of their new custodians.

The newest film of the Belgian brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne has a superficial resemblance to *Tsotsi*, but it differs importantly in its focus, tone and concerns. It lacks the South African film's mix of crude sentimentality and blunt brutality. *L'Enfant* also features a young urban outlaw and a baby, but this time the child is the leading character's newborn son and there is no parent-child bonding in the offing.

On the day after 20-year-old Bruno meets the infant and is given it to mind by his girl while she applies for family benefits, he sells it to a black market adoption ring. It is this almost reflexively mercenary and unintentionally cruel act that begins Bruno's ordeal, an increasingly harrowing odyssey through the streets and back alleys of Seraign, the bleak, depressed eastern Belgian industrial river port that is the Dardennes' hometown.

As *L'Enfant* opens, Sonia (Deborah Francois) is searching, child in arms, for her son's father after being released from a maternity ward that he never visited. She finds that Bruno (Jérémie Renier) has sublet their apartment to strangers in her absence, and when she finally locates him as he tries to work some scam in the city's streets, he's pleased enough to see her, but apparently about as interested in showing her his new stadium jacket as he is in the kid.

When Bruno returns from his unthinkingly callous transaction with his new bank-

roll—it's probably the most money he's ever had—he's shocked by Sonia's stricken response and physical collapse. This lumpen boy is more cheerfully venal and amiably amoral than truly wicked. And as he rushes about the city trying to repair a situation he never contemplated, he's at least as concerned with his own deteriorating prospects as with Sonia. And for good reason, as it soon transpires. Nevertheless, there are very small hints of a barely awakened conscience. And as Bruno struggles with the direly descending spiral of consequences of his transgression, he musters a rude nobility that transcends his punk cool.

Renier, who played an ethically conflicted 15-year-old in the Dardennes' *La Promesse* 10 years ago, is consistently convincing as Bruno's initial complaisance is assaulted by his confrontation with stark realities. Renier has a mildly, pleasantly vulpine face, a blonde thatch above, and what at first seems a boyishly blank aspect begins to convey, in embattled glances, and small, tense mouth movements, glimpses of stress, confusion and eventually misery.

Francois' depiction of Sonia's sharp transition from delight in her attachment to this casually attentive lover to a furious disillusionment is impressive.

The Dardennes' presentation of the film's events is intent but dispassionate. It's almost as if they were as concerned to find out what will happen as anyone else. *L'Enfant* is aesthetically spare, but its spirit of moral austerity proves more apparent than actual. Out of the steady concentration on social details, the periodic scene-setting cityscape shots, the lingering mid-shots of Bruno and the camera's patient tracking of the action, a tension evolves and tightens, and it has as much to do with human possibilities as narrative suspense.

The filmmakers are scrutinizing the condi-

tion of this youth floundering in an urban scene with which they're more than familiar, and while they are scarcely pushing philosophical or socio-economic generalizations, Bruno's adventure does seem meant to evoke understanding. (A previous Dardenne film, *Rosetta*, helped lead to the passage of a minimum-wage law for youth in Belgium.)

At the end, *L'Enfant's* resolution, and its impact, are balanced on the possibility of redemption and hope. You may find yourself withholding judgment of Bruno in the face of *L'Enfant's* powerful sense of transcendent potentiality.

*L'Enfant* will be shown through May 9 only on the Emerging Cinema screen at the Market Arcade Film and Arts Center, 639 Main Street.



Linda Cardellini as Mary-Anne in *American Dream*.

## NITRATE TRACES

### *American Gun*

review by M. Faust

Reviews of the film *American Gun* inevitably seem to frame it in comparison to *Crash*, which isn't fair. The similarity is that both movies examine a social issue though a large number of characters, most of whom are unrelated to each other. But *Crash* was hardly the first film to use that structure: Robert Altman has often employed it, most notably in *Nashville*, and it's been a staple of independent films of the last decade. Besides, *American Gun* was in production well before *Crash* was released.

And even if you could make a case that writer Steven Bagatourian and director Aric Avelino were ripping off this year's Oscar laureate, at least be happy they're ripping off a good movie.

*American Gun* looks at the effects of guns—handguns, more specifically—on people in three disparate locations. In Oregon, Janet (Marcia Gay Harden), a single mother with one teen-aged son, faces the impossible task of getting on with her life three years after her other son was a participant in a Columbine-like rampage. He and his partner killed several schoolmates before being shot to death themselves by the police.

On the anniversary of that event, the local news media rehash it. She accepts money to be interviewed on television, thinking that it will help pay the tuition at the private school her son David (Chris Marquette) now attends. Instead, it reopens the wound in the community, making life worse for both of them.

In Chicago, high school principal Carter (Forest Whitaker) is on the verge of burning out. He moved his family to an inner-city neighborhood where he thought he could make a difference, but it's an uphill struggle, especially when he discovers an honor student (Arlen Escarpeta) carrying a gun. The boy has

good reasons that Carter is hard pressed to dispute: is he fighting a losing battle?

The third thread involves almost no use of guns at all. In Virginia, Carl (Donald Sutherland) is a kindly shopkeeper running the business that has been in his family for several generations. His granddaughter Mary-Anne (Linda Cardellini) is sent to work there while she attends the University of Virginia—neither of them her choice but a family tradition. But Carl's business is a gun shop, and while he runs it with pride on the assumption that he is dealing with hunters and collectors, Mary-Anne sees the world much differently.

*American Gun* is the first feature from these filmmakers, and it shows. While an excellent cast does typically strong work, some of the confrontational scenes needed to be a little better honed. A few of them play like improvisational exercises. And there's a potential for melodrama that the script ill-advisedly gives in to. The strength of the film is that it prefers to ask questions rather than preach answers, which makes it a difficult story to conclude: the way Bagatourian and Avelino have chosen seems pointlessly harsh, like a demonus ex machina.

But despite its weaknesses, *American Gun* is a thought-provoking film that poses hard questions about a difficult topic. No matter what your opinion on the issues surrounding the presence of hand guns in modern America, you'll find things in here you won't easily be able to answer.

*American Gun* will be shown on May 10 and 11 only on the Emerging Cinema screen at the Market Arcade Film and Arts Center, 639 Main Street.

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