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April 28, 2023

Volume 1, Issue 17

SMALL MYSTERIES

An Interview With Laura Citarella



In 2002, Laura Citarella co-founded El Pampero Cine with Mariano Llinás, Agustín Mendaliharzu, and Alejo Muguillansky. In 2011, they released Citarella's first feature, *Ostende*, starring Laura Paredes, who would also go on to star in Llinás' epic *La Flor*, which Citarella produced. That 14-and-a-half-hour film brought El Pampero Cine greater international attention, and on the heels of that massive achievement, Citarella has reteamed with Paredes once again, serving as both writer and director on her latest — *Trenque Lauquen*.

Though not as lengthy as *La Flor*, *Trenque Lauquen* spans over four hours and two parts, telling the story of the disappearance of Laura (Paredes, reprising a version of her character from *Ostende*). Slowly shifting focus from two men trying to untangle Laura's story to a telling from her own perspective, the film's length allows ample room for compelling tangents, as well as for an uncommonly rich characterization of a lead character. *Trenque Lauquen* confirms El Pampero Cine as one of today's most exciting sources of cinema, and on the occasion of the film's theatrical release on April 21, I sat down to talk with Laura about *Trenque Lauquen* and her filmmaking method.



You co-wrote *Trenque Lauquen* with Laura Paredes, who also stars in the film as well as in your first feature, *Ostende*. Was working with Laura — as a writer and an actor — a natural continuation of your relationship, or was it more a direct attempt to make a film in a different way?

There are many, many reasons. The first reason we decided to work together was that we had worked together on *Ostende*, and we wanted to continue working with the same character, because that character allowed us to invent a lot of scenes that were interesting for us in terms of cinema, in terms of thinking of possibilities of mise en scène. So, when we finished *Ostende*, we decided we wanted to work together on another film.

We were making *La Flor*, also, which is a film that I produced, and she was one of the main characters. So we continued working together and she's also a friend of mine; she's Mariano Llinás' [Citarella's producing partner and the director of *La Flor*] wife, so we are like a family. And we wanted to work on another

thing, and it was very natural for us because we are also very close friends. So we decided to invent this kind of saga and to bring the same character to another universe, a universe of fiction, to another town, but keeping the same character, keeping the same curiosity of the character, the same ideas of the character regarding fiction, regarding this idea of a very — Laura [Paredes' character] is like a voyeur that is all the time looking at reality and trying to find mysterious things in reality and in the world. So we wanted to bring this to another place.

We decided that this “place” could be Trenque Lauquen, because I wanted to make a film there, which is my family's town — I was not born there, but I spent my summers during my childhood there. I decided I wanted to make the film there because it was also a way of portraying the town, not only bringing in the same detective-esque character, but also because I wanted to show this place: to portray the radio, the streets, the lagoon, my grandmother's house, my uncle who also appears in the film. I wanted to shoot an *idea* of the place.

So when we decided all these things, I also decided I didn't want to work alone. Because I like to write with partners; I don't like to write films on my own. So I decided to call Laura because she's not only an actress, she's also a theater director and she writes and directs her own plays. So I knew she could write with me. And it was great not only because she's great as a writer, partner, and friend, but also because when we were writing her scenes, she would read her lines, and the character would already be there, which was an interesting experiment.

Could you elaborate on what it is about the character of Laura and her voyeuristic qualities that makes her particularly cinematic?

If you watch, for example, Rossellini's films, with Ingrid Bergman, you will see Italy through the eyes of Ingrid Bergman. That was a great thing for him because he invented that character to show Italy, not through his alter ego, but through a character that was a foreigner in Italy. And, for me, Laura works in a similar way — because she is an outsider, she sees things as strange.

Working with a character from *Trenque Lauquen* or *Ostende*, it may have been difficult to have this new gaze at the town. If the character was not someone coming from another place, it would have been very difficult to make this character a voyeur. So the main thing is to bring a stranger to a town and make this stranger look at the town in a very particular way. Because when you live in the town, you cannot see the small mysteries hidden in it. But if you come from abroad, you come from outside of the town, you go through the door of *Trenque Lauquen* and suddenly, you will see lots of small mysteries hidden in different places. So that was one of the keys for me.

There's also the idea that a character like this allows you to invent lots of possible mysteries, and they can spread because if you have a character that has this detective-esque idea of life, it's possible that this character will be able to find stories everywhere. So the difference for me between *Ostende* and *Trenque Lauquen* is that, in *Ostende* and maybe at the beginning of *Trenque Lauquen*, the mysteries are something [the character is] looking at, and she's thinking of, but then the mysteries start bringing her into the fiction. Her physical body is brought into the fiction because she finally goes to see these women. She

finds something that she feels is a mystery, and then she goes to share a moment with these women, and suddenly she's living with them. So it's like she puts her body into the adventure.

The version of *Trenque Lauquen* that's played at festivals and is currently being released in international markets is broken into two parts that are each a little over two hours. I'm curious if, first, you always conceived of the film as something that would extend beyond the limits of the traditional theatrical film, and second, how you arrived at the specific structure and balanced your vision as a filmmaker with the realities of how people watch movies in theaters and eventually in their homes?

I didn't know that the film was going to be a four-hour film, though I knew that it was going to be long, because the script was already long. The film is as long as is needed. A lot of stories are told, a lot of things are happening, a lot of characters are suffering or having their emotional processes... I think that you need all this time to spread these stories and to bring them to cinema. So the other day, somebody asked me, "Why four hours?" And I said, "Well, the answer would be, why not?" Because it is thought that films should be like one-hour-and-ten or one-hour-and-thirty minutes. And that is something established by the market, but I don't think of films as a merchandising process, but a mode of expression, of developing the language of cinema and trying to make cinema keep moving. So in a way, I'm not dealing with that kind of concepts of establishing a standard way of showing or telling a story with standard duration, and also a standard way of producing because the film is produced also in a very independent way, in a very particular way, which is something that goes far from the traditional way of producing films, and also the film is shot with a camera that is not the standard quality that is required nowadays for the making of cinema.

And so the decisions I made about the film are political, but they are also about what is needed for this film. Maybe if you want to make a film with another story with another character with another nature, you would only need an hour or an hour-and-thirty minutes or two hours. This film arrived at its own duration; that was the structure that was needed for the film to exist. So the duration is not something that you just

decide, it is something that while you are making a film and you see the materials and you edit, makes itself apparent to you.

I think that people are a little bit afraid of watching films that are four hours long. You could also think that these are two films of two hours each, and you could watch them separately, or you could watch them together. People also are very used to watching 10 hours of TV series and they don't complain. I think the difficulty is that going to and staying in a dark place for four hours makes people feel trapped. It's interesting, because some of the classics are long, or directors like Martin Scorsese, who came of age in that classical period — they make long films. It's something that you can find in the story of cinema, millions of things that are three, four, six hours long. But I think it's something that is disturbing for people nowadays because the rhythm of life is different. But of course, if you like cinema and

you like the experience of cinema, I think that's not going to be a problem for you.

This film was produced by the collective El Pampero Cine, which you co-founded in 2002. I'd love to hear generally about how that group was founded, how it functions, and how that may have shifted over the last 20-plus years, which I'm sure is a big question. But also, more specifically, I'd like to hear about how working with the group has affected your filmmaking over time and how it affected this film?

Well, the group is a group of filmmakers, and we all change roles all the time. I produce the films they direct and they work on the films that I direct. And that's something that we found through all these 20 years. And we've been making things in a better way. We started slowly, we eventually started showing films to the





whole world, but because we are very independent, we initially didn't have the tools to show our films internationally. And then we started going to festivals and being part of more important, prestigious places.

I think the key to understanding El Pampero Cine is that there is no standard. Standard is a word that we don't even use, because we don't work with the standard of quality that is requested by distributors, we don't work with actors that have, say, 20,000 followers on Instagram, we don't work with standard durations, with standard formats, and we don't work with the standard mode of production. For each film, we think anew, how we can produce this film, rather than working in a uniform mode of production. We are always moving and reinventing ourselves and the films, and so when we start to feel that we are working in a systematic way or that we are repeating ourselves, we try to

rethink those methods. The idea of being in movement all the time is one of the keys of El Pampero Cine.

We also don't have a boss, we don't have a producer or investor telling us how to make films, how to finish them, how to show them, or when we have to finish. I think that's another key, because we work in a very horizontal way, and we are a... I don't know if collective is quite the right word, but in a way it is. And apart from that we are friends so that's easy because we understand each other and we know how to deal with each other because we know each other very well.

I think that *Trenque Lauquen* would have been very difficult to make more traditionally, because usually I [determine] what a film is as I'm shooting it. When you apply to a production fund, for example, you have to tell them your motivations and how you

imagine you will shoot the scenes and place the camera. Usually, I don't know those things before going to shoot because I think that the film is also a document of *how* you learned to make it. So for me, it's important to have this sensation of play alive, that you can go to set and try something and suddenly you have an idea and you shoot it and that informs your approach to the film. It's something that happens on set, it is not something that you can come up with in your house, in your office, in front of your computer.

Of course, you have to work a lot before, during, and after production. But, for example, I don't usually rehearse with the actors, because it's much more important to me to work with them on set. One of the main actors in *Trenque Lauquen* is Ezequiel Pierri, my husband, who isn't a professional actor, and so I didn't know how he was going to work. I wrote the character for him, and I knew he could play him, but it was much better to go to the set, and to try different things with him there to figure out the character, rather than doing that in my office in Buenos Aires. This is something that is possible because of our way of producing films. If you tried to make a film like this in the mainstream industry, you wouldn't have the time, you wouldn't have the money to pay the actor, which of course wasn't an issue for me because he's my husband. And so you couldn't go to the set to experiment, because you wouldn't have the time or the money, and you wouldn't have the buy-in from your actors, because people are just going to set to work and then want to go home.

Being in a group also means that we are aligned in the same pursuit of asking questions and testing hypotheses about cinema. We're this sort of club where we have similar sensibilities and we like the same films and we can discuss our own films from that shared point of view, but we also give ourselves space to make our films — in the moment, on set — and not before we get there in our heads. I think that's key to how we produce films.

Research is something that is a big part of most filmmakers' and artists' work, but in this film's first part, we see its characters engaging in their own research in a way that felt novel to me. Where did the idea for that plot come from, and how did it mirror your own process?

It's a mix of things. I realized the other day, during an interview, that I really love letters. I've written letters to friends my whole life. Even as a kid and I would see my friends every day we would write letters to each other. It's something that I really like, and that I find really romantic. I also find that there's something secretive about letters, that it's not the same thing to say something as it is to write it and send it to someone. So I really like this idea of letters. And then, there are two different ideas. On one hand, of course, I do research before making films. I read books and watch films, and those lead me to other books and movies, and I map them out to help organize my ideas. It's a very expansive system, so if I buy a used book and there's something written in it, or a little piece of paper inside, I include that as well. I started thinking about how that might be a good place to start a mystery, to unfold that little, little hint into a full story. So that was something I was interested in before I started writing.

And then there was this character of Carmen Zuna. For me, it was interesting to work with this character who is very representative of a generation of women. When my grandmother was 30, she lived in Trenque Lauquen and had three children. She was very particular, and the people in the town thought she was crazy and that she wasn't a good mother. For example, she bought herself a car, and for the people in this small town in the '60s, it was very annoying for this woman to own a car. So they thought she was crazy and she was taken to a psychiatric institute where she was given electroshock therapy, and a lot of things happened to her just because she was very particular. I found this story to be very typical for a generation of women because I started talking with friends who had grandmothers who were given electroshock therapy just for being eccentric. So I thought it was interesting to invent a character who was occupying such a place in the town: a teacher with a very active sexual life, with this Italian lover, which is common in Trenque Lauquen because there are lots of Italian people and descendants of Italian people. And the idea that an active sexual life had to be kept secret. So I realized I was a little bit obsessed with this type of character, and it was great to be able to combine my interest in letters and notes written in books with this teacher having an erotic correspondence, and for all these elements to make sense together in the film. — **INTERVIEW**
CONDUCTED BY JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER

A COUNTESS FROM HONG KONG *Charlie Chaplin*

Is there a greater rags-to-riches story than Charlie Chaplin's? A real-life tramp, Chaplin grew up dirt poor on the streets of London. The son of two destitute music hall entertainers (dad an abusive alcoholic, mom committed to a mental institution), as a child, Chaplin showed promise performing stage comedy and working the music hall circuit himself with his brother, Sydney. This would lead to a few tours of North America with a vaudeville troupe and then a contract with Keystone Studios. By the time Chaplin was 25, the former street urchin had become a bona fide movie star.

More than that, at his peak, Chaplin was almost certainly the single most famous person in the world — a global cinema superstar. But just as inconceivable as his rise was the precipitousness of his subsequent fall from grace. Dogged by mounting controversies, from scandalous tabloid romances to accusations of communist sympathizing, public opinion gradually began to turn on Chaplin, especially as his films grew darker and more political. His 1947 masterpiece *Monsieur Verdoux* was the beginning of the end for Chaplin in America — his sobering reflection on the West's descent into fascism and the use of the atom bomb did not land well with an American public ready to celebrate the end of World War II. It didn't help matters that Chaplin had done away with his beloved tramp character. *Verdoux* bombed, Chaplin continued speaking out against HUAC and anti-communist persecution, and five years later, while attending the London debut of his next film, *Limelight* (1952), his re-entry permit was revoked, and he was effectively banned from the United States. In less than three decades, Chaplin went from the most beloved man in America to an exile.

This historical and emotional context powerfully undergirds Chaplin's final few films. *Limelight* is the most explicitly autobiographical of these, concerning a once-popular clown who has fallen into obscurity, but it's also not hard to see the real-life resonance of *A King in New York* (1957), wherein Chaplin stars as an ousted European monarch taking refuge in America. Finally, there's *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967), Chaplin's last and most reviled film. Much like his other late work, it often calls back to earlier moments in Chaplin's oeuvre: in particular, *Countess* bears a clear kinship with one of his first features, *A Woman of Paris* (1923). Not only do these two films share the unique distinction of being the only directorial efforts in which Chaplin himself does not star (although he does make brief cameo appearances in both as a porter), but they're also connected by their female protagonists, each a woman of low morals who has attached herself to a high society man in an attempt to transcend her socioeconomic class. Edna Purviance's woman of Paris began as a poor village girl, who flees her stringent father and, it's implied, takes up as a prostitute in Paris. Though she now lives a life of luxury among the Parisian aristocracy, she is unable to fully shed her origins and become a true member of that class — a reflection of Chaplin's own anxieties at the time, his feeling of being an outsider among his wealthy peers.

The titular countess of Chaplin's later film has a more complex backstory, and actually represents something of an inversion of Purviance's character. In fitting with Chaplin's displaced position, hers is a riches-to-rags story, rather than the other way around. The film opens with images of the streets of Hong Kong, "overcrowded with refugees" as a result of two world wars. The camera soon finds itself in a red light district, where an American navy man comes across a sign advertising dances with a countess. We learn from this opening scene that there is an abundance of "Real Live Aristocrats" here — they're the descendants of Russian oligarchs who fled the Bolshevik Revolution, first to Shanghai and then to Hong Kong. While of royal blood, these women are countesses in name only, as they're now destitute and passport-less, with many resorting to prostitution to survive.

One of these countesses is Sophia Loren's Natascha, and much like Purviance, she embodies some of Chaplin's class anxieties 40 years previous; Loren is not just filling the role of the tramp, she is also representing Chaplin the exile. Her counterpart is Marlon Brando's Ogden, an American diplomat docked overnight in Hong Kong on his way home from touring the world. Ogden goes out on the town that night with a friend of his oil baron father, who introduces him to Natascha. Though they do form something of a connection, it's nothing that would warrant further contact, and Ogden seems to have nearly forgotten her the following morning — until he finds her hiding in the closet of his cabin, attempting to stow away and escape to America. What follows is a series of slapstick scenarios, most of which involve Natascha and Ogden running back and forth between different rooms of his suite to avoid detection, and while initially at odds, they gradually begin to fall for each other. Although Chaplin is working with color and the widescreen format for the first time in his career, his film is still charmingly old-fashioned. The set-ups are simple, with the bulk of the film contained to Ogden's two-room cabin. One can sense some of the Chaplin of the Essanay and Mutual days, mining for all of the permutations of gags these two rooms and their half-dozen doors can provide.

As we learn about Ogden, we realize that he may embody another portion of Chaplin's personhood. A careerist politician, he's also



in the midst of a deeply unhappy marriage and plans to get a divorce upon his return to the United States. At the start of the film, he's hopeful that a Secretary of State nomination may be coming his way; instead, he learns partway through his trip that he's been named to the much less glamorous position of ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and with that announcement comes a directive from Washington that he is not to go through with his divorce, for PR purposes. He's devoted himself to his career, to being a public figure with all of the expectations that come with it, and he has done so at the expense of his own happiness.

It's easy to see how Ogden's dissatisfaction might have emerged out of Chaplin's own struggles with life in the public eye — though his political commentary and increasingly challenging films might suggest otherwise, Chaplin wanted nothing more than to please his fans, and the loss of public favor was devastating, haunting him for much of his life. Ogden is introduced to us monologuing about world peace, a clear nod to the politicized sermons of *The Great Dictator* or *Monsieur Verdoux*. In that sense, he's further aligned with the figure of Chaplin, however, his monologue (and by extension that of Verdoux and the Jewish barber) is also amusingly undercut when

it becomes clear that he's simply preparing a speech, not speaking from the heart. The actual content of that speech is not treated with any seriousness by the movie, not in this early scene nor later when he delivers it at a press conference. This playfulness is characteristic of the film's light tone, especially in relation to those that precede it.

And indeed, *A Countess from Hong Kong* is the most optimistic of any of Chaplin's late films, all the way through to its conclusion. There are numerous dancing scenes interspersed throughout the film — from the opening, with the anonymous sailor and the Hong Kong dance hall, to Ogden and Natascha's night out on the town, to a hijinks-heavy ballroom dance aboard the ship — and each is united by a sense of artifice, whether it's the transactional pseudo-romance of a dance with a prostitute, or the phony conversations and conventions of a high society dance floor. These moments all lead to the final scene: our lovers have parted, Ogden returning with his wife to the mainland, and Natascha remaining in Honolulu, having successfully acquired a green card. In one of the most arresting images of Chaplin's career, we see Natascha gazing longingly out of a restaurant window at the departing boat, the window's glass simultaneously reflecting images of couples twirling on the

dance floor behind her. But, of course, Ogden hasn't left on the boat, and soon he weaves his way across the dance floor, and finds Natascha, whereupon they embrace and join the other dancing couples.

Donna Kornhaber argues, compellingly, in her book *Charlie Chaplin, Director* that this conclusion is a cynical one, that Natascha was always using Ogden as a pawn and that their coming together here is merely a reiteration of those transactional dances that came before. But I see it differently. Things do close just as they began, but something has changed — look no further than the tears shimmering in Loren's eyes. Unlike the romance between Purviance and Adolphe Menjou in *A Woman Of Paris*, which was never able to rise above their class constrictions, here Ogden turns his back on societal expectation, leaving his wife and career in order to obtain true love, real happiness. "I would rather be happy than president," he remarks, a straightforward sentiment, but one made considerably more powerful when we remember that Ogden is serving as a figure for Chaplin's unease with public expectation. These two sides of Chaplin's personhood — the exiled tramp and the inhibited diplomat — are finally reconciled. One imagines that Chaplin regrets not being able to let his own figurative boat sail away without him, to let the burden of public opinion go, and instead prioritize his own happiness. *A Countess from Hong Kong* is a quintessential late film, not just because of its peculiar style, but because it carries with it that special disposition of an aging master in reflection. It's hard not to be moved by a 78-year-old man, one who's been on top of the world and at rock bottom, striving to find peace strictly on his own terms. — **BRENDAN NAGLE**





POLITE SOCIETY

Nida Manzoor

When Ria Khan (Priya Kansara) holds a kung fu stance, it has the effect of transforming the rich colors, the intricate design, and the long flow of her traditional South Asian dress into something like a superhero costume. It's such an undeniably fun and exciting image, but one that writer-director Nida Manzoor, creator of the Channel 4 show *We Are Lady Parts* (2018-), does little to further bring to life. *Rye Lane*, the superior British debut thus far in 2023, played true to its rom-com genre, but tweaked that architecture through its vibrant visual style and a specificity of and attention to location. *Polite Society*, on the other hand, isn't really committed to any of the genres it mashes together, let alone its style. It's directed with rote competence but pronounced flatness — a true television sensibility.

Though the film's premise has a simple, even cathartic, clarity — Ria is trying to save her sister, Lena (Ritu Arya), from giving up on her passions, settling down with a boring, conventional man (Akshay Khanna), and resolving into patriarchal normalcy — Manzoor muddies this with the twist reveal that the true villain

is... a woman. The actress playing her (who we won't reveal for the sake of spoilers) is clearly having a good time with the tropes, and her character is still clearly motivated by a misogynistic ideology, but she's also one who is ultimately drawn from some regressive tropes about aging women turning evil by trying to cling to youth and beauty. Setting Ria against her, rather than a more uncomplicated villainous man, saps a lot of the fun from smashing the patriarchy with a spinning kick.

But even the film's martial arts foundation, which should distinguish the film stylistically and technically, and elevate its televisual drama into melodramatic action spectacle, is mishandled. Kansara gives a highly amiable and dorky performance, but Ria's passion, and her YouTube channel, feel too anonymous and unconvincing — it's telling that on her bedroom wall is a poster of Bruce Lee (arguably the first martial artist to spring to most minds), though not in *Enter the Dragon* (1973) — or even *Fist of Fury* (1972) or *The Big Boss* (1971), for that matter — but instead as Kato from *The Green Hornet* (1966-1967). It's all just a shorthand to communicate a general sense of rebellion; her desire to be a stuntwoman is just window dressing, and it could functionally be replaced with almost anything — it's

only resolved by chance once the real story is over. This would be quite strange if *Polite Society* was truly a martial arts film, but at its core, it isn't. Sure, there are fights, which though fairly unimpressive and mostly consisting of slow-mo and the same jump-kicks on repeat, offer diverting enough entertainment in the moment. But ultimately, they're entirely superfluous to the film's sum: there isn't a single thing that would change if any one of them was cut out.

Utilized similarly to the film's musical numbers, these action sequences serve to communicate outbursts of emotions, but only those which have already been expressed through dialogue. They are neatly divided from "reality" by a caption describing who is "vs." who. This seems like a rule made to be broken by the film's second half, when its "twist" forces the genre elements into the otherwise down-to-earth drama, and takes it over entirely. It's a clever idea in theory, but that liberating sense is undermined by the fact that the fights could simply be removed from the film with little consequence. As for the aforementioned musical numbers, there's actually only one, and it's utterly cut to pieces so that it doesn't get in the way of the plot's mechanics — the beauty of pausing a narrative for the respite of a musical interlude, like, say, when Harpo plays his harp in a Marx Brothers movie, seems lost on Manzoor. She doesn't demonstrate much of a feel for genre at all, which makes all of these elements feel almost cynical, as if they're just a way to manufacture an artificial hook and a stronger pitch.

The same is true of the *Polite Society's* visuals at large, all of which all feel like part of a transparently thin sheen plastered on top of an otherwise quite ordinary film; a few half-hearted whip zooms and chapter titles do not a style make. And certainly not an original one. It's clear that *Polite Society* is more influenced by Edgar Wright and Quentin Tarantino than anything that influenced *them*, and even then it's all the product of a very general vibe rather than any specific technical craft or point of view. It notably lacks that quality of so many of the greatest martial arts films from Hong Kong — as memorably quoted in David Bordwell's *Planet Hong Kong* (2000), from a negative review of *King Boxer* (1972) — of being "all too extravagant, too gratuitously wild." In an interview for *Collider*, Manzoor talks lovingly about test screening, which mostly existed to shave off some of the film's edges, preventing it from becoming too

anything. But given the generic final product, it's tough to imagine *Polite Society* even had many to begin with. — **ESME HOLDEN**

DIRECTOR: Nida Manzoor; **CAST:** Priya Kansara, Ritu Arya, Nimra Bucha; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Focus Features; **IN THEATERS:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 43 min.

R.M.N.

Cristian Mungiu

"With formal restraint and symbolic penchant, Mungiu delineates a geography of ethnic and cultural anxiety through the relative microcosm of Matthias' village, rendering the uneasy ground between the high heavens and low subalterns with an immediacy that's at once tempered by the camera's austere, almost detached gaze. The violence perpetrated by xenophobic sentiment is given both origin and outlet, and in *R.M.N.* we bear witness to the predictable laundry list of talking points that have, sadly, christened themselves as such: globalization, disenfranchisement, populism, liberalism, identity politics, and the like." —

MORRIS YANG

DIRECTOR: Cristian Mungiu; **CAST:** Marin Grigore, Judith Slate, Monica Birlădeanu; **DISTRIBUTOR:** IFC Films; **IN THEATERS:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 2 hr. 8 min.

PETER PAN & WENDY

David Lowery

Nestled in David Lowery's filmography, between his *Badlands*-indebted Sundance breakthrough *Ain't Them Bodies Saints* and his quietly shattering journey across the eons, *A Ghost Story*, is what at first glance is a curious outlier: 2016's *Pete's Dragon*. A loose remake of one of Walt Disney's less remembered forays into integrating live-action with animation, Lowery parted ways with contemporaries like Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* and Jon Favreau's *The Jungle Book* — which prioritized CGI garishness and slavish fidelity, respectively — to make something almost revolutionary. Tossing aside everything but the skeleton of the premise, Lowery refashioned the story as a comparatively modest, understated fable of an orphan,

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abandoned by tragedy, raised in the wild by a giant furry dragon until such a time that the outside world encroached upon their paradise. Taking its inspiration from the doomed-to-be-fleeting bond between a boy and his dog, the film is awash in natural beauty, understated '70s production value, a smartly curated soundtrack expansive enough to showcase both Leonard Cohen and St. Vincent, and a Spielbergian mix of high adventure and the first blush of melancholy. It's also one of the single best arguments in favor of a hotshot indie filmmaker taking a corporation's money to play in a larger sandbox.

All of which is to say that if anyone's earned the benefit of the doubt in returning to this particular well, it's Lowery. And return he has with *Peter Pan & Wendy*, which somewhat predictably doesn't afford the same amount of latitude in reinventing the 1953 animated classic to fit the filmmaker's sensibilities. For better or worse, this remains the story of Peter whisking away the three Darling siblings — although true to the title, eldest child Wendy has been elevated to a true co-lead — to the fantastical playground of Neverland, where they're joined by Tinker Bell, the Lost Boys, and Tiger Lily in facing off against the obsessed/incensed Captain Hook and his band of pirates. Even the crocodile makes a brief appearance. Boldly re-conceiving this particular story for contemporary audiences is practically a siren's call for ambitious filmmakers, which in the past few decades has led to the aforementioned Spielberg, Joe Wright,

and Benh Zeitlin all but crashing upon the rocks with their own updates. It's somewhat understandable why Lowery might have chosen to play things so safe in his turn at bat, but the results are slightly underwhelming all the same.

Taking most of its inspiration from merely acknowledging how mortifyingly reactionary the 1953 film must appear to modern viewers, most of Lowery and his co-writer Toby Halbrooks contributions can be filed under best practices simply for avoiding a round of problematic discourse (although the crowd that's super upset about a Black Little Mermaid is yet to be heard from). Alexander Molony, the young actor who plays Peter, has a notably dark complexion, Tinker Bell is played by the multiracial actress Yara Shahidi, and the Lost Boys feature several actors of color in addition to a handful of girls and even an actor with Down syndrome. Princess Tiger Lily, a sore spot as recently as eight years ago when Rooney Mara appeared in the role, is played by Indigenous actress Alyssa Wapanatâhk and is as far from a mute damsel in distress as one can get, with the film flipping the dynamic so that she's the one riding in heroically to rescue Peter. Beyond the diversity in the casting, the film has also done away with all of the casual misogyny of the original, which is every bit as uncomfortable to sit through as its racism. (If you haven't seen the cartoon in a while, it's fair to bet you don't remember how much of the action is driven by every woman being jealous of one another or, for that matter, there being multiple gags



related to the size of Tinker Bell's backside.) Ever Anderson's Wendy is no longer a coquettish accessory who longs for more days spent living out of the nursery with her younger brothers and eyeing every other female character suspiciously as competition for Peter's affections. Instead, the character now bristles at her surrogate mother role, cleverly evades giving Peter a kiss, and fully throws herself into the scrum, wielding a cutlass and engaging in as much derring-do as the boys.

The most notable change here is in the dynamic between Peter and Hook (Jude Law), with the film devising a fraught backstory for the famed villain, painting him as the aggrieved party in a feud that extends far beyond the captain's hand being fed to a crocodile. Law plays the famously cowardly and foppish Hook as a tragic figure, fueled as much by rejection by a former friend as resentment over a missing appendage. This also coincides with the decision to emphasize Peter's capriciousness and impertinence; his tendency to lash out and hold his friends emotionally hostage. It furthers a recent Disney trend of humanizing its antagonists (see also: *Maleficent*, *Cruella*) as

wronged or misunderstood outsiders, and it's to Law's credit that he's able to build his performance on top of a foundation of resentment and longing for everything that's been taken from him while still giving a good snarl and contemptible line readings.

However, one can appreciate Lowery's sensitive handling of problematic material while still finding the overall results wanting. Returning almost the entire production team behind *Pete's Dragon*, *Peter Pan & Wendy* is by comparison quite muddy-looking in its interior scenes and washed-out and flat in its exteriors, with much of the action set against what looks like digital barf. Minimal effort seems to have been made to recreate the hand-painted cel animation aesthetics of the animated version, with dreary minimalism and muted colors having overtaken Neverland. There's also a weightlessness to the FX work — not ideal in something that features this much flying — and a plodding, going-through-the-motions quality to the film on the whole, particularly in its first half which is marred by a dogged faithfulness to the original text. And the result of sanding off most of the cultural insensitivity is an absence of actual tension: there are no suspicious Lost Boys or Indigenous tribes to win over, nor is there any Tinker Bell-inspired mayhem (Shahidi is mostly forced to smile and silently mouth encouraging dialogue in close-up, with the character rewritten to be a consummate ally). Most frustrating of all is how diminished Lowery's voice is in the film, demonstrating little of the tactile production design, obsession with the natural world, or temporal playfulness that defines his best work — the closest the film comes are a couple of brief interludes that posit, in rapid succession, what Wendy's entire life might look like. Even the Daniel Hart score is blandly forgettable, other than when it strains to incorporate "You Can Fly! You Can Fly! You Can Fly!" If *Pete's Dragon* felt like a young filmmaker sneaking something personal and idiosyncratic onto the assembly line, *Peter Pan & Wendy* unmistakably feels like corporate product — something inoffensive enough to appeal to small children and Disney board members alike. — **ANDREW DIGMAN**

WINTER BOY

Christophe Honoré

"Instead, the incidents Honoré highlights are outgrowths of Lucas's transmuted emotions: he's aloof with his friends, overshares with hook-ups, and possessively tries to seduce his brother's boyfriend. None of these threads culminate; rather, the film ascends into near-tragedy and schmaltz. As a portrait of grief that avoids extremes, *Winter Boy* is tasteful to a fault. We can see that, denied the normative rite-of-passage markers of late-adolescence, Lucas is casting about for something new to aim for: he seems to have no particular interests of his own, nor does he want to adopt those of the people around him. To surround this chaos with near-diagnostic maturity is less a useful balance on the part of Honoré, and more a stodgy mischaracterization." — **MICHAEL SCOULAR**

DIRECTOR: Christophe Honoré; **CAST:** Juliette Binoche, Vincent Lacoste, Paul Kircher; **DISTRIBUTOR:** MUBI; **STREAMING:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 2 hr. 2 min.

DIRECTOR: David Lowery; **CAST:** Alexander Molony, Jude Law, Ever Anderson; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Disney+; **STREAMING:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 46 min.



ARE YOU THERE GOD? IT'S ME, MARGARET

Kelly Fremon Craig

Legendary author Judy Blume holds a special place in this writer's heart, a sentiment that may seem peculiar given Blume's specialty in chronicling the tumultuous coming-of-age of her female protagonists. In what universe does a young man find relatability in such topics as menstruation and training bras? As a child, I was a voracious reader, and would tear through anything in which word was attached to paper. Growing up with two older sisters meant a lot of young adult novels geared toward the female reader (which was borderline taboo for a boy). One of the most memorable reading experiences of my young life was Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, which chronicled its titular heroine's struggles to understand her ever-changing body and mind. What initially seemed foreign soon became bracingly personal, unlocking the secret struggles

of my two older teenage siblings, who, up until that point, seemed both alien and, quite frankly, insane. But Margaret's struggles also became my own, a realization that lent a certain crystalline understanding: no matter the particularities of age and gender, we all face hardships in the seemingly never-ending battle of growing up.

This translatability comes from how humane Blume was in her storytelling, a trait that singled her out above the hundreds upon hundreds of fellow authors trafficking in similar themes and material. That same humanity is on full display in writer-director Kelly Fremon Craig's big-screen adaptation of *Margaret*, a remarkable achievement given the current state of the tween and teen film landscape, where wish fulfillment and group dance parties have replaced anything resembling authenticity. Craig's last film, 2016's *The Edge of Seventeen*, was similarly grounded in a recognizable reality, plumbing the depths of hostility and

NUCLEAR NOW

Oliver Stone

"Not only does the documentary — and, by proxy, Stone — peddle a highly politicized narrative vaguely marketed as populist, it also takes the posture of superior morality and claims the arguments being made are objective. What's the cornerstone of objectivity? That's right, centrism! Stone... [claims] its adherents are the only rational ones left... with those radical socialists who are too busy dealing with that 'intersectionality' bullshit. The film goes one step further when its assertions enter into the realm of complete indifference toward human life: we're told that since there were no nuclear-related deaths at Fukushima, it proves the comparative safety of this form of energy. How about we check in with the survivors in a decade and see if that's still the case?" — **PAUL ATTARD**

DIRECTOR: Oliver Stone; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Abramorama; **IN THEATERS:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 45 min.

narcissism found within its wholly unlikable — and completely relatable — protagonist. Here, we have the titular Margaret (Abby Ryder Fortson), only 11 years old and bravely entering the sixth grade after being forced to move from the blissfully bustling streets of New York City to... New Jersey. She's still a tad naïve in regards to the "joys" of growing up, viewing it as a time in one's life where anything seems possible. Mom Barbara (Rachel McAdams) and Dad Herbert (Benny Safdie) are supportive, loving, and want only the best for their daughter, as does drama queen grandmother, Sylvia (Kathy Bates). But despite this stable foundation, Margaret often feels a sense of isolation in dealing with the pitfalls of puberty, even despite almost immediately befriending a trio of girls in her new town. It is for this reason that she turns to the Big Man Upstairs, praying for guidance in understanding her hormone-addled body and increasingly fickle psychology.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret is as matter-of-fact in its portrayal of religious questioning as it is in such supposedly verboten subjects as menstruation and bra size (at least at the time of the book's release), eschewing the kid-glove approach most Hollywood productions take and which sadly lead to nothing but fostering guilt and shame in its younger viewers. Mom is Christian and Dad is Jewish, with a traumatic incident involving Barbara's past leading the parents to adopt a strategy in which Margaret will decide on her own what religion she would like to pursue, if any, and to do so in her own time. That plot detail takes center stage in the film's overly busy second half, as Margaret's religious coming-of-age seems to coincide with that of her physical one, a metaphor presented with the subtlety of a

sledgehammer. Still, kudos to Craig for tackling such potentially divisive subject matter in a way that never feels less than genuine, regardless of the execution's occasional lack of elegance; in fairness, there exist exactly zero tweens who are void of melodramatic tendencies, and so the specific tenor the film traffics in makes a certain amount of thematic sense.

That ambition, unfortunately, makes for an inconsistent final product, as Craig is unable to juggle so many side characters and subplots in a way that proves dramatically satisfying. She is far more successful in the movie's first half, which effortlessly cuts between its various characters and plot threads, and hints at a far richer final product than what is ultimately delivered, as focus is eventually (and quite understandably) narrowed to that of our titular character. Mom — and by extension, McAdams — suffers the most, as what starts as a portrait of a woman struggling to find newfound purpose after giving up a fulfilling career for supposed suburban bliss is abandoned long before the credits roll. This is symbolized by Barbara's never-ending search for the perfect couch, the purchase of which will seemingly tether her to a life she may not want, and a detail which Craig completely boondoggles when the viewer suddenly notices in a random scene that, hey, they have a couch. One would imagine that there is a much longer version of *Margaret* on the cutting room floor, although McAdams still proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that she is one of the most innately likable and versatile actresses working in film today, even if her character is ultimately given short shrift. Fortson, for her part, is quite earnest in the lead role, delivering both the virtues and drawbacks that descriptor so often suggests. Craig, meanwhile,

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does nothing particularly adventurous visually — not that the film calls for it — but she does at least manage to make her '70s setting feel both effectively specific and paradoxically timeless. In the end, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* isn't a perfect film and ultimately struggles to find a necessary balance, but it more often than not does justice to Blume's singular authorial voice and resolved approach to telling young women's stories, and that certainly deserves a few Hallelujahs. — **STEVEN WARNER**

DIRECTOR: Kelly Fremon Craig; **CAST:** Abby Ryder Fortson, Rachel McAdams, Benny Safdie, Kathy Bates; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Lionsgate; **IN THEATERS:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 45 min.

THE EIGHT MOUNTAINS

Felix van Groeningen & Charlotte Vandermeersch

Adapted from Paolo Cognetti's award-winning novel of the same name, *The Eight Mountains* opens with a young man's voiceover accompanying a series of natural Italian landscapes. The voice belongs to Pietro, the only son of Torinese middle-class parents — his father a factory engineer, his mother a teacher — who recounts the story of his childhood years, specifically a summer holiday in 1984 when he finds an opportunity to leave the hubbub of city life and experience the simplicity of living in a remote Alpine village called Grana. It is in Grana where he first encounters Bruno, another boy of similar age, with whom he forms a close and solid friendship despite their apparent behavioral and class differences. In quite the same manner, the Belgian directorial duo of Felix Van Groeningen (*The Broken Circle Breakdown*, *Beautiful Boy*) and Charlotte Vandermeersch conjure an intimate and tender portrait of a buddy story that progresses toward delineating a grander landscape of social concerns. It's especially easy, after we see the two kids roaming the pastoral valleys, joyously playing in the village's alleyways, and accompanying Pietro's father during his regular mountain climbing, to recall, like Pietro, his old man's saying: "Every season of light needed to be followed by a dark one. A time of toil, tediousness, and gloom." Sure enough, the change of season arrives when the kids reach adulthood: Pietro is now a young man with no clear purpose, living from moment to moment, clubbing or spending time with his new, bourgeois friends, while Bruno is forced to make a living in the city as a construction

worker. This grave transition marks the beginning of their diverging paths, which last for about fifteen years, until Pietro's father dies.



It's this death that provides a crucial narrative point in Van Groeningen and Vandermeersch's narrative, and reveals some of the more metaphorical aspects of *The Eight Mountains*. What begins something like a reminiscence of Vittorio De Sica's earlier works (those which mainly revolved around child characters), and later evokes the familial crises or brotherly struggles of Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*, eventually turns into a collision of different Italian neorealist approaches. Bruno shows Pietro a collapsed shelter that had been built by his father in the mountains near their old holiday retreat, and as he suggests that

THE ARTIFICE GIRL

Franklin Ritch

"*The Artifice Girl* is arriving right on the cusp of a new found fascination with the subject, as ChatGPT and AI art have taken the world by storm. Think pieces both for and against are strewn about all over social media, with tech companies touting endless applications that may or may not ever come to fruition. Could this ultimately all be to the betterment of the human race? Or is it just another venture capitalist-funded shell game? We don't know yet, but *The Artifice Girl* suggests some new potentialities to fret over." — **DANIEL GORMAN**

DIRECTOR: Franklin Ritch; **CAST:** Tatum Matthews, David Girard, Lance Henriksen; **DISTRIBUTOR:** XYZ Films; **IN THEATERS & STREAMING:** April 27; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 33 min.

they rebuild the cabin together, the film's symbolic intonations are plainly revealed. On one level, it's an ideal synthesis between the opulent, industrialized Italian cities and traditional peasant villages, between the middle and working classes, and between childhood innocence and adult responsibility. In one sequence, Pietro confesses that "[his] life seemed partly that of a man, partly that of a boy," somewhat emblematic of the necessity for mutual understanding between the country's alienated cultures that are required to reconstruct and redeem the old land's heritage. On the other hand, it's certainly possible to argue that this straightforward narrative frequently dilutes the depth of dramatic incident, with the weight of both *The Eight Mountains'* inter- and intrapersonal conflicts comparable to an underdeveloped, hastily expanded old-school European TV drama. Fortunately, Van Groenigen and Vandermeersch's directorial instincts cohere well enough with Ruben Impen's awe-inspiring cinematography to ground the more inevitable dimensions of this decades-long bildungsroman within a bittersweet tale of friendship and self-realization. Amid the delicate balance of personal feelings and broader, more thrilling developments, the filmmakers have fashioned convincingly palpable human relationships — also thanks to the cast's unassuming but reliable chemistry — and an invigorating atmosphere that nonetheless provides enough space and quiet for our patient, contemplative eyes. — **AYEEN FOROOTAN**

DIRECTOR: Felix van Groenigen & Charlotte Vandermeersch;
CAST: Luca Marinelli, Alessandro Borghi, Elena Lietti;
DISTRIBUTOR: Sideshow / Janus Films; **IN THEATERS:** April 28;
RUNTIME: 2 hr. 27 min.

THE END OF SEX

Sean Garrity

In Sean Garrity's *The End of Sex*, romantic comedy only begins after the dazzling charm of first loves and first dates wears off. Enough about love at first sight, and in its place is love that is worn out by the exhausting mundanity of parenthood. The film follows high-school sweethearts, Josh (Jonas Chernick) and Emma (Emily Hampshire), as they navigate what it means to be intimate all over again after years of marriage. When their daughters head off to camp, the house is left in a haphazard disarray of children's toys — a part and parcel of parenthood,

sure, but Josh and Emma might as well be looking at a reflection of their own relationship. Immediately after the school bus leaves, Emma — who's looking as disheveled as Josh — jumps with excitement at the thought of re-invigorating their sex life. What ensues, however, is an endearing series of failed attempts: neither Emma nor Josh can admit to each other that they no longer know *how* to do it with each other. The use of screen text to expose the couple's inner thoughts — like when both parties fake an orgasm — works concisely in conveying Josh and Emma's newfound awkwardness with each other. Shots of children's toys strewn across the house also cut us off from seeing the couple fully hash it out, a brilliant touch in conveying how a couple's sexual passion is stunted by the rituals of parenthood.

These moments are as embarrassing as they are sweet. Hampshire and Chernick's electrifying chemistry convinces us that these are two people who are truly, hopelessly in love, but they have hit a wall when it comes to understanding how to express it. The film understands and is compassionate to the fact that though desire may wane after time, that isn't an indictment on a couple's commitment to one another. Admittedly, Chernick's script can sometimes seem to stray into the all too familiar territory of broken marriages and consequent infidelities, but it also surprisingly provides a refreshing insight into the lies that couples tell themselves — and each other — about how love, despite best efforts, sometimes becomes background noise in a marriage. From casual threesomes to drug-induced hallucinations to sex clubs, Josh and Emma are trying *everything* to find their way back to being sexually active again, but only Emily's friend enjoys the threesome, and the sex club looks more like a sad party filled with people who don't even want to be there. Reality disappoints, and so do Josh and Emma's fallible ideals of love and sex after years of marriage.

The End of Sex does an exceptional job of treating Emma and Josh's problems with sympathy and delicacy — their flings with outside parties or crushes on old flames are never a point of moral outrage. Instead, these events demonstrate just how sincerely committed to each other Emma and Josh really are. They *want* to be together, and that comes with accepting that sex is not the be-all and end-all of a relationship. In *The End of Sex*, there is no melodrama to be found in the waning of sexual



passions or confessions of illicit desires — the ordinariness of domesticity is where true intimacy is slowly nurtured. The toys littered across the house can tell a story of disorder. But they can also tell the story of a richly imperfect life built together with someone you love. — **SHAR TAN**

DIRECTOR: Sean Garrity; **CAST:** Emily Hampshire, Jonas Chernick, Gray Powell; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Blue Fox Entertainment **IN THEATERS:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 27 min.

SISU

Jalmari Helander

Jalmari Helander's *Sisu* is a lean piece of filmmaking with a simple pitch: a one-man army violently dispatches a handful of Nazis at the tail-end of the second World War. Opening narration clues the audience into the film's historical context, briefly describing the Nazis' 1944 scorched-earth campaign in northern Finland, before the film zeroes in on a stoic, grizzled gold digger

RADIANCE

Naomi Kawase

"Concerning the brief, fleeting romance between a woman who writes audio descriptions for films and her harshest critic, an all but totally blind man, Naomi Kawase's thinly-sketched *Radiance* feels designed to court claims of poignancy... But because the film is so often satisfied to lifelessly plod through the motions of a middling drama so light it might evaporate, there's not enough here to engage with past the surface. It's a nice surface, admittedly: the film is gorgeously lit and capably acted... But when used only to convey supposedly profound metaphor, even *Radiance's* naturalism feels like yet another cloying contrivance." — **CHRIS MELLO**

DIRECTOR: Naomi Kawase; **CAST:** Ayame Misaki, Masatoshi Nagase, Tatsuya Fuji; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Film Movement; **STREAMING:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 38 min.

in the middle of a now-empty country. Later, we'll learn that this man, Korpi, is an ex-commando responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Russians in the Soviet-Finnish War, an unstoppable killing machine so driven by revenge that he refuses to die. But his silent introduction renders later introduction superfluous. He's well-armed, not just with his pick-ax, but knives and a rifle, too. His search for gold in the dirt of this wasteland clues into a singular drive. In the shower, the camera scans his body and lingers on deep, wide scars, clear indications of long campaigns of violence. And like any movie badass worth his salt nowadays, he's accompanied by a very cute puppy. Anyone who has seen a movie could tell you Korpi is obviously a man you simply do not mess with.

But a caravan of Nazis does just that, discovering Korpi — to them, he's just a Finnish man on a horse — soon after he has struck a large sum of gold, and immediately messing with him. The film follows from there as the squad of Nazis hunts down the seemingly unkillable Korpi, both for his gold and revenge for what he keeps doing to their squadmates. This smorgasbord of

violence includes stabbing a knife through a Nazi's skull, shooting an MP-40 through another's chin, chucking a landmine at a Nazi's face, and much more. The pleasure of *Sisu* is in watching the bodies of deeply evil men explode into some nifty gore effects, a display of the type of carnage it's nearly impossible to feel morally guilty about. Every mutilated bad guy in *Sisu* has it coming.

Though that description might immediately recall *John Wick*, and later sections involving a crew of female prisoners Korpi frees and makes allies of invite comparisons to *Fury Road* (both of which some critics have been happy to indulge), comparing *Sisu* to either film is both inaccurate and a disservice. While Helander's craft is sturdy, and he takes care to create a few painterly images, it's far from the virtuosic intensity of Miller's film or the cleanly shot, nonstop kinetic action of Stahelski's work. It's not trying to be either, though. Instead, *Sisu* is a throwback in the mold of old-school revenge exploitation movies. Korpi's violent acts don't involve choreographed mayhem or athletic stunt work — they simply imagine an especially violent,



gory way to kill an enemy in 1944 and then execute on the idea with effects work. It's a method truly befitting its protagonist, who is less like Mad Max or John Wick than he is like a villain from an '80s slasher. He's silent, seemingly magically immortal, and lying in wait for his enemies to come across his path. And like so many of those slashers, Korpi is less out for revenge than unfortunately stumbled upon. With an adjustment of tone and a more likable set of victims, it's easy to imagine *Sisu* playing as a horror film.

While it only runs 91 minutes and does feature plenty of Nazi-killing, *Sisu* is imbued with the surprising virtue of patience. Helander has made a structurally sound movie that moves at a measured rhythm, allowing for room to breathe and reset in between the setpieces. It's a confident approach, and one that is sorely lacking in much modern action cinema, but it also lays bare and exacerbates the film's thinness. While Korpi has a legend behind him, and Jorma Tommila does an admirable job filling out the character physically, there's not much else to him than that materiality. This is true of every character in the movie, which has the unfortunate side effect of making the film's thinly sketched women come off as mere devices, existing to be tortured by Nazis and freed by Korpi before taking their own revenge. That *Sisu* is so simple is certainly part of its appeal, and it's entertaining to watch something this unburdened by the weight of any psychology whatsoever. But it's also a necessarily limiting approach. There is room for more in *Sisu*, which leaves the film sometimes feeling slight instead of succinct. It offers an exciting time nonetheless, but one that begins to evaporate almost as soon as it ends. — **CHRIS MELLO**

DIRECTOR: Jalmari Helander; **CAST:** Jorma Tommila, Aksel Hennie, Jack Doolan; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Lionsgate; **IN THEATERS:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 31 min.

QUASI

Kevin Heffernan

There's no denying a certain charm inherent to the Broken Lizard crew. Grating as they almost certainly are to your mom, there's always been a joy guiding their work, and the pleasure of watching friends ham it up while operating on their own singular, sophomoric wavelength is a dying cinematic art. Broken Lizard's

FREAKS VS. THE REICH

Gabriele Mainetti

"To its credit, *Freaks vs. the Reich* frequently indulges in grotesquely irreverent caricature, pitting faithful aphorisms against the bombast of battle, gleefully killing fascists, butchering rapists, valorizing the army of crippled partisans whose care Matilde finds herself under after a close skirmish with the enemy. But what's crucially missing from this irreverence is a larger sense of purpose — employing it to examine contemporary attitudes toward disability... or to experiment with grandiose ideas about predestination and free will. Much of the film plays it safe to crowd-pleasing retrospection: it is neither riotous nor self-aware enough to engender any more than the self-congratulatory wonder so emblematic of Naziploitation." — **MORRIS YANG**

DIRECTOR: Gabriele Mainetti; **CAST:** Franz Rogowski, Aurora Giovino, Pietro Castellitto; **DISTRIBUTOR:** VMI Worldwide; **IN THEATERS & STREAMING:** April 28; **RUNTIME:** 2 hr. 21 min.

particular brand is predicated on repetition — jokes, bits, sight gags — and intentional, unabashed fatuousness, an approach which resulted in their big break when *Super Troopers* was declared the best film of all time by a demo of five-Nattys-deep millennial frat bros across every American campus. But despite their specific flavor of lowbrow juvenalia and doofus man-children celebration taking a backseat to someone like Will Ferrell's in the aughts' cultural zeitgeist, there's more idiosyncrasy, and thus lasting power, in their work than something like the flaccid *Blades of Glory*, let alone the kinds of Rob Schneider-starring comedies they were up against. In their best moments, Broken Lizard's work scanned as something like diet *Wet Hot American Summer* — outlandish, yes, but devoid of any real eccentricity.

Of course, the group's popularity predictably proved to be of the flash-in-the-pan variety, the diminishing returns and already exhausted ideas of *Club Dread*, *Beerfest*, and *Slammin' Salmon* subsequently resulting in a decade-long disappearing act. Their latest film, *Quasi*, is the Lizards' first non-sequel since 2009 (the less said about *Super Troopers 2*, the better), and finds the troupe

slightly amending their formula. This time out, the comedic quintet — consisting of Steve Lemme, Jay Chandrasekhar, Paul Soter, Erik Stolhanske, and Kevin Heffernan (who here directs) — goes full Monty Python, delivering a cartoonishly grimy period piece in which each of the principal Broken Lizard players pulls double- and even triple-duty in a variety of medieval caricature roles. Loosely based on Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (except, obviously, not really), *Quasi* follows Quasi Modo, a hunchbacked torturer who engages in a film-length game of hide-my-feelings with insecure best friend Duchamp (Heffernan) and becomes embroiled in competing assassination schemes between Pope Cornelius (Soter) and "King Guy" (Chandrasekhar). The group hangs their jokes on the architecture of the *unlikely hero* narrative, makes sure to leave space for ample silliness that lets viewers know how harmless this all is (and thus, how gently to judge it), and basically calls it a day.

Which is to say, nothing much has changed. Broken Lizard might superficially tilt toward Monty Python with *Quasi*, and there's no denying a certain spiritual kinship, but these are still the meow game guys, for better and mostly worse. It's all simply too tired at this point. The particulars of humor barely matter, but here

mostly consist of everyone being obsessed with oysters, delivering French words with an exaggerated accent, and bandying about insults like "douchebaguette." In fairness, the group's obsession with repetition can pay off in a few isolated moments: the line "Sacré bleu, it's cordon bleu!" doesn't hold much intrinsic comedic value, but after it's repeated for the umpteenth time across only a few seconds, its brain-melting stupidity is likely to inspire a giggle from a not insignificant fraction of viewers. For some, this may be enough to justify the watch, and indeed it's tough to bemoan these dudes getting the band back together. But it's clear that this glorified hang out session is more for Broken Lizard than viewers. Good for them, but it takes a far better hook and loads more creativity, energy, and effort than this to convince viewers that it's worth watching you pal around and cosplay with your friends for 100 minutes. Broken Lizard may have made a career out of presenting themselves as jackasses on screen, but *Jackass* this is not. —

LUKE GORHAM

DIRECTOR: Kevin Heffernan; **CAST:** Steve Lemme, Jay Chandrasekhar, Adrienne Palicki; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Hulu; **STREAMING:** April 20; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 39 min.



**FIRST TWO PAGES OF
FRANKENSTEIN****The National**

The National are tired and worn out — that's the explicit subject of *First Two Pages of Frankenstein's* best song, "Tropic Morning News," but it's a feeling that runs throughout the band's new album. Lead singer Matt Berninger has always favored a particular persona: his white-collar drone, cryptically melancholy lyrics, and low baritone are signatures of the National's sound. In his monograph for 2007's *Boxer*, Ryan Pinkard cited American author John Cheever's preoccupation with off-kilter suburban angst as a conscious influence, and in the video for 2010's "Bloodbuzz, Ohio," Berninger took on the role of a punch-the-clock businessman getting drunk on his lunch break. What recent articles in *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* have indicated, though, is that this "sad dad" disposition isn't an act: between 2020 and 2021, Berninger experienced an intense period of

depression and writer's block. Regrettably, *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* suggests that the creative stagnancy remains.

But let's go back a bit first. After the National signed to Beggars Banquet in 2004 (now folded into their current label, 4AD), they adopted a certain extroversion that helped them find a very large audience. Their commercial breakthrough *Boxer* departed from the Americana leanings of their first two albums, as well as the post-punk influences and scrappy production of their Beggars Banquet debut, *Alligator*. While the roots of their current malaise were always implicit in their music, the group mastered the neat trick of selling glum introversion as Bono-ready arena fodder. And, as soon as their recording budgets allowed, the quiet, relaxed quality of much of their early music found space to accommodate "bigger" sounds, like Phil Collins-in-a-huge-warehouse drums.

The main problem with *First Two Pages of Frankenstein*, then, is that it sticks too closely to the same mood and sounds the group has favored for a while. They don't break a sweat here, although the mid-tempo "Tropic Morning News" and "Grease in Your Hair" at least offer some relief from a sea of slow ballads. Song after song launches with drum loops, synth pads, and acoustic guitars, and they only ever evolve by increasing in volume and piling on more instrumentation. Meanwhile, drummer Bryan Devendorf's programmed sounds are aggressively artificial and tinny. Even if the songs are more complex than typical rock music, their structures still fall far too neatly into an easy formula. It's all a recycling of ideas the National have executed much more powerfully on earlier albums, and that's before we get to something like "Your Mind Is Not Your Friend," the absolute nadir of their career, completely indistinguishable from 2000s "alternative adult contemporary" mush like the Fray.



First Two Pages of Frankenstein might play better if encountered as individual songs for Spotify playlist-filler rather than a complete album experienced in one sitting. Even as the lyrics delve into autobiographical detail, the music sticks to a politely downbeat mood. “New Order T-Shirt,” for instance, cites a real incident in which the TSA mistook Berninger’s alarm clock for a bomb at the Honolulu airport in 2010, while “Eucalyptus” documents a couple squabbling over their Cowboy Junkies and Afghan Whigs albums, as they plan to break up, which feels specific to the point of the personal. But it all never amounts to much.

There are better moments, like the aforementioned “Tropic Morning News,” which stands out due to its upbeat melody and arrangement, the contrast between the lyrics and music transcending any cheap irony. It addresses the practice of waking up and doomscrolling: “Got up to seize the day / With my head in my hands feeling strange.” The social damage of the present moment is stripped down to its effect on a married couple: “Oh, where are all the moments we’d have? / Oh, where’s the brain we shared? / Something somehow has you rapidly improving.” As Berninger sings about barely being able to hold down a conversation with his wife, the danceable tune suggests a brighter future beyond his current perspective. Still, even this song comes off as blinkered. Where “Bloodbuzz, Ohio” referred to both the band’s Cincinnati roots and the 2008 economic crash (“I still owe money to the money I owe / The floors are falling down from everybody I know”), “Tropic Morning News” is far more concerned with the impact of bad news

on a marriage than its material effects on a larger world.

Given the National’s sound and considerable influence in the music world, guest appearances from Sufjan Stevens and Phoebe Bridgers (who sings backup on two songs) are little surprise. And their unquestionable technical range is reflected in guitarists Bryce and Aaron Dessner’s side projects: the former composes classical music, while the latter co-produced and co-wrote much of Taylor Swift’s *folklore* and *evermore*, and turns out records as one-half of Big Red Machine, with Bon Iver’s Justin Vernon. But both those collaborations and any more potentially daring sonic trajectories are subsumed into *Frankenstein*’s defiantly gloomy sound. Bridgers’ voice is barely audible on the chorus of “This Isn’t Helping,” though her presence at least adds some emotional depth to the track, suggesting the possibility of escaping from Berninger’s introspection. Swift also turns up with a vocal on “The Alcott,” but instead of performing a full-fledged duet, she helps flesh out the song, weaving her softly mixed vocals together with Berninger’s and entering the band’s world rather than bringing them over to her brighter tone.

On their last album, 2019’s *I Am Easy to Find*, the National likewise tried challenging themselves by working with a cast of female guest singers, with mixed results at best. Transformed into an album proper after its composition for a short film by Mike Mills, that record introduced a roster of vocalists, including Gail Ann Dorsey and Sharon van Etten, and toned down Berninger’s presence (his

wife Carin Besser also writes many of the band’s lyrics). However, the result only worked to demonstrate just how crucial Berninger’s voice is to a working National sound. *First Two Pages of Frankenstein* moves more wholly back into that space, but also forward into a mood of emotional dissociation that doesn’t seem entirely intentional. As much as the album is soaked in fears of ruining friendships and a marriage, the hushed finale, “Send For Me,” scans as more numb than hopeful or interrogative, reflecting a record that is both thematically and sonically too unvaried and dispirited. Profound unease fades too easily into old formulas, and what’s left is just Starbucks background music.

— STEVE ERICKSON

LABEL: 4AD; **RELEASE DATE:** April 28

MY TADPOLE LEGION Squid Pisser

Anyone with a taste for Squid Pisser’s brand of whacked-out noise punk will likely be reminded of the Locust’s Infest-by-way-of-the-B-52’s genre concoction. And while that comparison might be slightly reductive, the similarities are definitely there: grinding guitars, blasts of synths ripped from a Cold War-era sci-fi B-movie, wild drum cacophonies, and throat-shredding vocals. Regardless of whether Squid Pisser’s tact was taken as mere flattery or if the group genuinely impressed him, their debut album — *My Tadpole Legion* — now arrives as a release from Locust bassist Justin Pearson’s label, Three On G Records.

Squid Pisser's lineup consists of singer-guitarist Tommy Meehan and drummer Seth Carolina, who also play in Deaf Club and Starcrawler, respectively, and the masked duo enlisted their friends — their "tadpole legion," as it were — to help fill out the gaps left by their sparse lineup. Meghan O'Neil of Punch and Super Unison, John Clardy of Tera Melos, Carolina's Starcrawler bandmate Arrow DeWilde, Yako of Japanese noise experimentalists Melt-Banana, and others feature on the record, imprinting their particular talents on the album's math-y hardcore punk blitz.

Squid Pisser nail their weirdo mission statement to the wall with opener "Liquified Remains." Propelled by Clardy's drums, the track is an intricate mess of abrupt rhythmic shifts, serpentine guitars, synth squirts, and toward the end, some good old-fashioned punk rock melodic fury. But even as the mangled mathcore gives way to a straightforward moshpit-ready breakdown, the traditional is again subsumed by the eccentric as soon as the next track. On "Violence Forever," Meghan O'Neil brings her ferocious vocal stylings to an intensely manic song so brimming with nervous anger that it erupts into a double bass thrash metal bridge seemingly out of nowhere.

As previously mentioned, the Locust's new wave grindcore looms large over Squid Pisser's artistic sensibilities, but there are shades of Daughters, Arab on Radar, and fellow collaborative-minded punkers the Hirs Collective as well; "The Everlasting Bloat" features screeching vocals that, in particular, recall Hirs' ghoulis,

post-hardcore shrieks. Elsewhere, Yako gives the title track a somewhat quirky edge, her off-kilter delivery echoing Mariko Gotô, the mercurial singer of Japanese jazz-punk outfit Midori. Arrow DeWilde, meanwhile, fronts the band's cover of "Marching for Trash" (originally by the Crucifucks), her croaked vocals a far cry from the snotty singing with which she graces her main gig's tunes. The song simmers with rumbling drums and buzzsaw guitars hosed with garbled synthesizers during the verses, punctuated by wild bursts of blast beats, and concluding with a rude (and disgustingly wet-sounding) burp.

Outside of subgenre nuances, *My Tadpole Legion*'s white-knuckle gnarliness doesn't offer a lot of variety. But it does offer strangeness, an aspect sorely missing from most contemporary punk. Scowl's latest EP flirted with grungy alt-rock, while Turnstile's *Glow On* provided the scene with respectable face by leaning into popoptimist tropes. Acts like Zulu and Soul Glo, while musically adventurous and not without a sly sense of humor, still play things relatively straight — Zulu's brutal beatdown parts; Soul Glo's careening grooves. Squid Pisser, however, seem most concerned with pushing their sound into weird new places, bringing an absurdist musicality to their whiplashed punk experiment. They don't fully succeed, owing to that pesky long shadow cast by their label boss' former band. But it's impossible not to get sucked into the reckless abandon on display here.

As is customary with noise punk like this, *My Tadpole Legion* wooshes by in a flash,

the songs melting into a blur of raging aural violence that is stomped into silence with the abrupt ending of the 30-second "Fuck Your Preacher." But before things truly draw to a close, Squid Pisser pack in one last prank in the form of "Lord of the Frog": two minutes and change of nasty, stomach-churning power electronics sludge — all tape hiss, crushed bits, and samples maimed beyond recognition. A fitting end to a beautifully hideous 19 minutes. — **FRED BARRETT**

LABEL: Three One G; **RELEASE DATE:** April 14

FUSE **Everything But the Girl**

Taken in its context as the opener and lead single of *Everything But the Girl*'s 11th studio album, *Fuse*, "Nothing Left to Lose" almost seems like a fake-out. Reportedly the last song recorded for this project, the subtly irresistible cut starts with a resounding bass thump and builds to a pretty propulsive garage not unlike what Tracey Thorn and Ben Watt were doing on their last two albums, before they stopped making music for nearly a quarter century. Compare this to the rest of *Fuse*, which seems to loop back to the more downtempo art pop of the duo's early years, but with the sense of world weariness markedly magnified — and, mind you, this was already a group who trafficked in wistfulness, who as young people sang in a very old-soul way.

To an extent, that impression still lingers here — even though Thorn and Watt are both now 60. "Maybe we were born at the wrong time," Thorn wonders on "Time and



Time Again." Later in the record, there's a three-song suite — "Lost" through "Interior Space" — that deals with the loss of a parent; a longing for something lasting to which to attach oneself; and the imprisoning capacity of the mind, in that order. During an initial listen, these digressions into gloominess seem to turn what has the potential to otherwise be a dance album — for grown ups, a lament for aging ravers — into something altogether too dour. But more time spent with *Fuse* reveals a well-rounded satisfaction of the divergent interests that Thorn lays out in the final track, "Karaoke": making music that can simultaneously "*heal the brokenhearted*" and "*get the party started.*"

Indeed, *Fuse's* dancier qualities eventually

emerge, just as the kick drum is carefully, pleasingly brought into the mix at almost the halfway point of "Caution to the Wind." A little fluttering, processed vocal fragment acts as a stray stimulant as well. There are polished pops, clicks, and squeaks across "Time and Time Again" that make one's feet start tapping, and even though "Forever" is the middle song in the aforementioned thematic bumper stretch, the music backing its clearly down-and-out narrator moves at a good clip. This particular pairing of upbeat tempo and downbeat subject serves to suggest a certain hope for the future, a search that's not been deterred and will go on.

EBtG's expert integration of form and content is on rich display throughout

Fuse, a testament to the duo's concise and deft songwriting abilities. (The production and composition of every song but one is credited to the two bandmates.) Sometimes this linking of theme and sound can verge on the obvious, as when Thorn croons "*and don't just discard your old self,*" followed by a whooshing, soft yet emphatic brush of percussion, on "When You Mess Up." But, more generally, the approach is so restrained and minimalist that they get away with it. The same song's minor key piano figure needles in self-interrogation and, after repeatedly acknowledging humans' propensity to screw up, the song fittingly ends, melodically unresolved. —

CHARLES LYONS-BURT

LABEL: Buzzin' Fly/Virgin Records;

RELEASE DATE: April 21



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