

THE BLOG 07/01/2016 09:10 am ET | Updated Jul 01, 2016

A Game of Betrayal



By Marc Hershon

In his terrific essay about David Lynch (and the making of *Lost Highway*), the late David Foster Wallace stated the problem “a lot of us cineastes have with Lynch is that we find his truths morally uncomfortable.” He describes Lynch as heroic “because we Americans like our art’s moral world to be cleanly limned and clearly demarcated, neat and tidy. In many respects it seems we need our art to be morally comfortable.”

One can only imagine what David Foster Wallace would make of the artistic courage displayed by filmmaker Phil Leirness. His new film, *The Lady Killers*, has been described by renowned comedy advisor, teacher and author Steve Kaplan as a “dark comedy so chilling, you don’t know whether to laugh or scream!”

Earlier in his career, Leirness achieved modest success with *The Party Crashers* and *Spectres*, films that while, at times, delightfully off-kilter in their approach, were, nevertheless, recognizable in form and comforting in theme. His two most recent films — *Karl Rove, I Love You* (described by Jim David in *The Huffington Post* as “a political Blair Witch Project”) and *The Truth Is Out There* (an ambitious documentary exploring comedy, consciousness and conspiracy) — both reveal an artist seeking bigger playgrounds, interested in exploring the things in life that make him angry, and doing so with humor and without rules. As both a filmmaker and as a California state-certified Violence Prevention Specialist Leirness has grown increasingly disturbed by the way images and situations of exploitation (especially the exploitation of women) are marketed, sold and consumed as entertainment and diversion.

The goal of *The Lady Killers* seems nothing less than to challenge and change the way audiences view such exploitation and Leirness has used dark comedy to tackle that challenge. According to sexual and relationship violence educator Abigail Sims, “Just when you think you have a handle on the exploitation (in movies), this film upsets the apple cart as it depicts toxic masculinity brought to its ghastly logical conclusion.”

Dark comedies are tricky tightropes to walk. Too much darkness or too much heavy messaging and the film can collapse under its own weight. Too much comedy, too many laughs, and the story is in danger of not having enough gravitas to play true.

It can easily become spoof rather than satire. Lose control of the tone in a dark comedy and there is no recovery. Even when you get it right, you have made a film that is doubtless deeply unsettling to its audience. In fact, if it isn’t unsettling, it’s not dark comedy!

Distribution companies seem terrified of dark comedies. Even when one works, maintaining its tone and tackling a topic worthy of deep dark exploration, the film’s distributor is likely to “hide” the fact that it is a dark comedy, preferring to market a fundamentally unsettling film as a thriller you might enjoy.

This was the case with the recent, and very effective, *Nightcrawler*. There was no sense conveyed through its advertising that the film was a dark comedy, and that therefore, it would ultimately leave you feeling betrayed, on a moral level. Of course, based on user reviews, many viewers seem to have felt betrayed, anyway, by not getting the film that was advertised to them.

This fear of the genre seems to extend to film festivals as well, if *The Lady Killers* is any indication. Leirness has said that festival programmers who have long championed his work told him about the deep division the film had caused within their programming teams or with those responsible for marketing the festival's brand. Consensus has become the name of the game for corporate brands, be they distribution companies, or film festivals.

For dark comedies, the purpose of which are to challenge conventional wisdom, accepted mores and attitudes as well as business as usual, the name of the game is, quite simply, betrayal.

An actual game of betrayal is at the center of the action in *The Lady Killers*.

The plot revolves around the intricacies of the sort of competition typical to young men, where sexual conquests earn points for their participants. In this case, the seven men playing are old enough to know better, but seemingly driven by the need to blow up their lives, their contest is high-stakes, involves several crimes and their sexual conquests earn them points in a variety of categories. A delightful job is done of tying game elements into the movie, almost to the point where the contest central to the film's action becomes a perverse twist on the board game *Clue*. One such visual element is to give all the main characters a dominant single color, a technique we ultimately learn could tell us who is really doing what to whom.

Leirness and his cast use laughs to guide the audience into the darkness. The dialog starts off playful, with a bouncy rhythm. Then, as the film's first act unwinds, as the players gather, the start of the game approaches, and the rules are ultimately revealed, the dialog gets more dicey and confrontational. The men's language gets more crass and their behavior towards the women who are their targets in the game becomes genuinely uncomfortable to watch. As a result, the levity that is offered feels more pointed, hinting at even greater discomfort to come, while at the same time serving as a welcome relief to the behavior of the characters.

A major shift takes place leading into the film's third act. *The Lady Killers* almost turns into a different movie.

In lesser hands, such a shift would mean the movie would be lost, but the darkly comedic tone Leirness and his actors have been able to craft (with able support from composer Greg De Belles' versatile score) nimbly moves along with the shift. The laughs become heartier as the edge they're set against becomes more ironic.

The particular darkness of the film's third act serves not only as a seeming comeuppance for the film's most reprehensible characters, but almost rewards us for the behavior we have been made to endure — a reward that, upon reflection, might just leave us feeling even more unsettled than anything we had witnessed earlier. In fact, once the film's stunning denouement settles in our psyche, we realize both that the third act shift should not have been all that surprising and that the seemingly satisfying ending might have been the darkest move played by Leirness in his game of betrayal.

This is as it should be in a dark comedy.

The diverse cast is seamless and, depending on which character one hates the most (or least), there will be different standouts. The women are attractive, the men are funny and everyone plays it for real. The pain of these characters, while rarely explored directly, is never far from the surface and the performers themselves often achieve an improvisational feel to their work that never punctures the film's tone.

Leirness has developed an approach to his characters that is refreshingly free of judgment. In *The Lady Killers*, that approach leaves him vulnerable to a criticism similar to that leveled against virtually all filmmakers who have succeeded with dark comedy, as well as against David Lynch, that by not overtly commenting upon the characters' or their behavior, the film (and therefore the filmmaker) is as sick as the behavior being depicted.

As David Foster Wallace wrote, "This is bullshit of the rankest vintage and not just because it's sloppy logic, but because it's symptomatic of the impoverished moral assumptions we seem now to bring to the movies we watch."

The behavior *The Lady Killers* depicts might be misogynistic, homophobic, vile, but the film itself is about a culture that encourages the acceptance of exploitation in its many forms and it shows ways that exploitation leads to violence. Such a mirror, if held correctly, is going to make an audience uncomfortable and as stated, distributors seem to be terrified of films that make audiences uncomfortable. After all, how do you market them? Well, you can market them as “suspense pictures”, (as was done with *Nightcrawler*).

As David Foster Wallace explained, “discomfort we feel at ‘suspense’ movies is perceived as a pleasant discomfort. And this is why, when a filmmaker fails to wrap his product up in the appropriate verity-confirming fashion, we feel not confusion or even offense but anger, a sense of betrayal - we feel that an unspoken but very important covenant has been violated.” A dark comedy simply cannot be “verity-confirming”.

So what will become of dark comedies, a genre whose very best exemplars aim to betray the prevailing culture’s “impoverished moral assumptions”? The fortunes of *The Lady Killers* currently reside in the hands of the programming teams at the Austin, San Diego, Raindance and Flickers Rhode Island film festivals, as well as the Downtown Film Festival Los Angeles, New Filmmakers New York and CPH Pix (Copenhagen). One can only hope that one or more of these prestigious venues will have the courage to program a film that will certainly have people talking for a long while.

Stand-up comedian, late night comedy writer and producer of the forthcoming documentary *Dying Laughing*, Suli McCullough describes *The Lady Killers* as “a devilishly smart, funny, and honest look at how men and women will be dating in 2016! Phil Leirness doesn’t try to dress up these murkiest of waters. He shows us exactly what men really think about women and just how far they’ll go to get what they want. An anti-romantic dark comedy, the guys in this film are cunning, calculated, and sub-zero cold. Dating is a contest to be won at all costs. Trust me, ladies, your boyfriend doesn’t want you to see this film! I felt like I was watching chess masters play checkers on that dating site Tinder!”

McCullough is onto something. After one test screening, no less than three couples broke up because of their reactions to what they had seen. Certainly that points out one possible marketing campaign - an antidote to the usual date movie nonsense - “*The Lady Killers*: See it with someone you’re not really sure about!”

Follow Marc Hershon on Twitter: www.twitter.com/hershco



Marc Hershon

Branding expert and co-author of the business book “I Hate People!”; host of “Succotash”, the Comedy Soundcast Soundcast

M O R E :

Movie Review

Marc Hershon

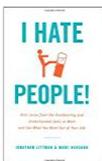
The Lady Killers

Phil Leirness

Dark Comedy

This Blogger's Books and Other Items from...

amazon.com



I Hate People!: Kick Loose from the Overbearing and Underhanded Jerks at Work and Get What You Want Out of Your Job

by Jonathan Littman, Marc Hershon

r
t
f