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Director Raymond St-Jean tackles the story of Canadian hitman Donald Lavoie in “Dusk for a Hitman (Crépuscule pour un tueur).”

BY DOUGLAS DAVIDSON on APRIL 1, 2024 · [🗨️](#) [👤](#)

Real life is often fodder for storytelling. Typically, one will take an experience or emotion and transcribe that into something unique. However, fiction isn't always as compelling as reality, which is why we get stories like *Dumb Money* (2023) detailing the GameStop stock explosion, *NYAD* (2023) chronicling Diana Nyad's attempt to swim from Cuba to Florida at 64 years old, and filmmaker Raymond St-Jean's (*Louise Lecavalier: Sur son Cheval de Feu*) latest project, *Dusk for a Hitman (Crépuscule pour un tueur)*, recalling Donald Lavoie's pivotal role in bringing down the Debois brothers criminal organization. Narrowing its focus to begin in the fall of 1979 until his turn in the early 1980s, St-Jean attempts a striking and harrowing look at the tenuous existence of criminal life where trust shifts from day-to-day based on the cost-benefit of perceived loyalty.



Éric Bruneau as Donald Lavoie in the action/thriller, *DUSK FOR A HITMAN*, a Saban Films release. Photo courtesy of Saban Films.

In the 1970s in Canada, Donald Lavoie (Éric Bruneau) held multiple jobs for gang leader Claude Debois (Benoît Gouin) including tracker, money-handler, and hitman. Debois trusts Lavoie enough to entrust him with gang secrets and allow a certain leeway in their conversation, but, when a job goes sideways, the tether between the two weakens until Lavoie finds himself on the run with few options left to him: take his chances with Debois or with Quebec's gang task force led by Patrick Burns (Sylvain Marcel). Every way Lavoie looks, his freedom is gone, replaced by being a pawn in someone else's game, but if he can do things right, he may just walk away alive.



Benoît Gouin as Claude Debois in the action/thriller, *DUSK FOR A HITMAN*, a Saban Films release. Photo courtesy of Saban Films.

Let's be clear about one thing out of the gate: *Dusk for a Hitman* is adapted from a true story, but should not be taken "as" truth. As the film is revving up, St-Jean places title cards which tell the audience that what follows is based on Donald Lavoie's life but other elements are manufactured. Granted, even the best biography-based films are subject to perspective or editing in order to conform to both creative vision of the storyteller and the limitations of the medium, this is worth noting so as to remember not to get bogged down in the details. This signals to the audience that they'd be better off thinking of what follows as criminal allegory or crime drama rather than a true crime story, which works to its benefit, helping to pave the way for expectations.

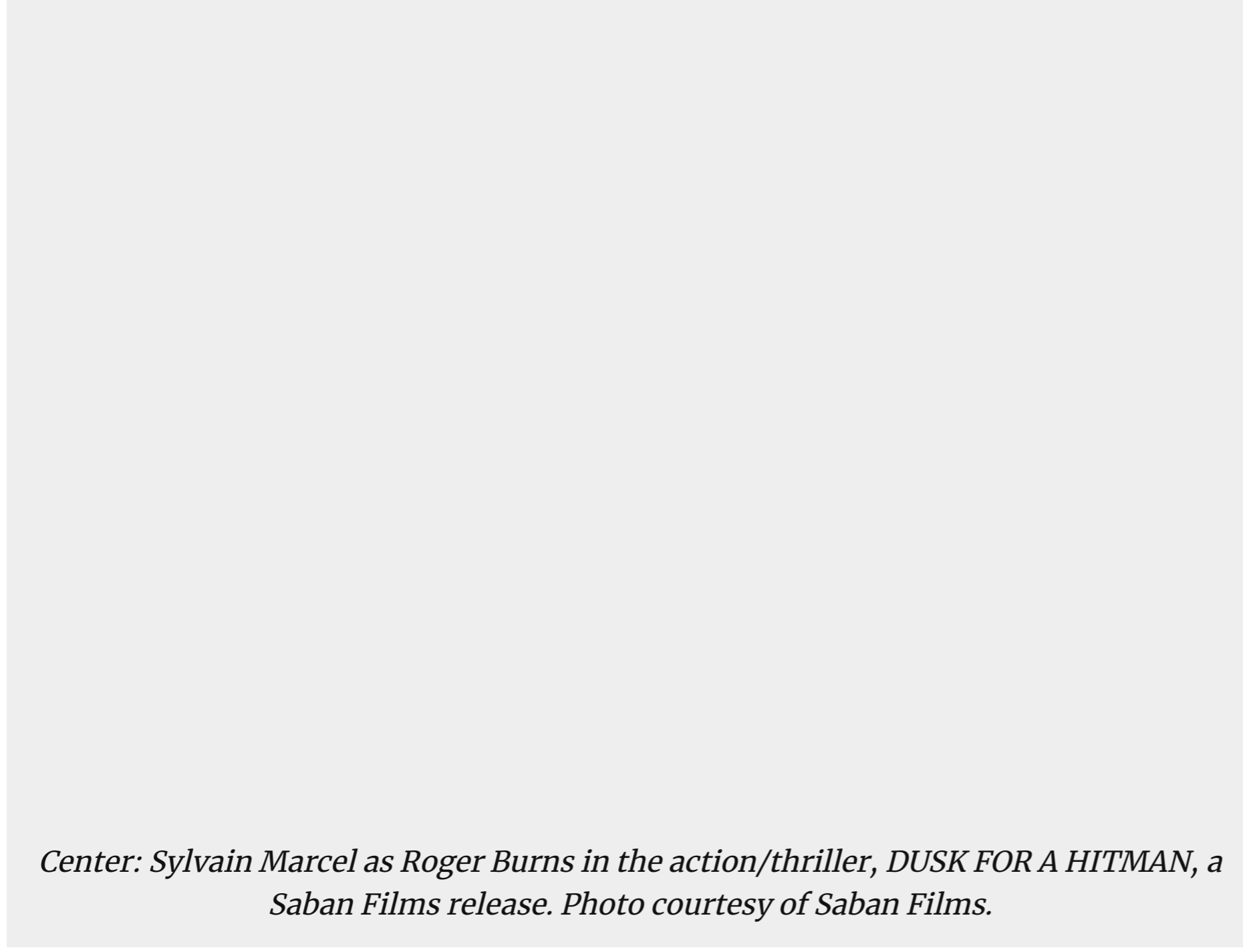
This matters because, for better or worse, as written by St-Jean and co-writer Martin Girard (*Saint-Narcisse*), all the characters except for Lavoie are fairly thin, left to be stereotypes more than living breathing people. As presented, Debois is the boss for no other reason than he is and we're given no sense of his operations beyond what Lavoie does, except, even then, we don't always possess the same context that Lavoie does. Lavoie's wife, played with as much depth as is available by Rose-Marie Perreault (*Genèse*), often comes off as something that's to be used as emotional bait for Lavoie (and the audience) rather than to be viewed as a person. If not for one piece of dialogue, the smallest of lines, that implies her Francine was born into the criminal world, she did not marry into it, one would wonder just why she remains with Lavoie given what we see. Even their daughter is merely referenced as "the girl" by both parents, a name absolutely absent, as though neither could be bothered to give the child one. This makes the whole of the film a little harder to connect with as Lavoie's world is made of cardboard cutouts that essentially represent either threat or safety.

There is another option, another way to read this, if you will, that's far more compelling — this is all intentional by St-Jean and Girard to create a physical representation of how Lavoie sees and engages with the world around him. That his life is best when he's wrapped in the metaphorical arms of a father figure who gives him permission to be violent, to sleep around with other women, and who congratulates him for being cold and calculating, thereby leaving very little room for a wife and child, despite a clear need from Bruneau's presentation of Lavoie to have that part of life, too. Thus, *Dusk* transforms from the expected crime drama/turncoat story into a compelling analysis of criminality and the reasons someone might do what they do. Everyone is thinly constructed because the film makes less room for them to exist outside of when and where Lavoie needs them to have meaning. Thus, the weight of the drama is something that sneaks up on you, as we, like Lavoie, start to realize that the cool and collected killer is merely a boy looking for permission to not be afraid. With this read in mind, *Dusk* transforms itself into a slow burn thriller wherein nothing goes as expected, not the relationships, not the violence, and not the decisions within. Building toward an ending that history's already decided, yet carrying with it a heavy weight of regret.



L-R: Éric Bruneau as Donald Lavoie and Rose-Marie Perreault as Francine Lavoie in the action/thriller, *DUSK FOR A HITMAN*, a Saban Films release. Photo courtesy of Saban Films.

There are two more things to address before wrapping and that's the translation of the French title and the marketed summary of the film. *Crépuscule pour un tueur* translates to "Twilight for a Killer" which is infinitely better a title than "Dusk for a Hitman." As presented in the film, Lavoie is far more than a hitman, taking part in different operations with the Debois organization, though he was clearly someone granted permissions to take out individuals with prejudice. Additionally, using "twilight" implies a place between spaces, whereas "dusk" is literally the darker portion of twilight, implying that it's more darkness and violence rather than a person in limbo, battling things out. This brings us to the marketing which chooses to portray this film as Lavoie turning on Debois because of an order that Lavoie refuses to obey. In truth, the film has several moments wherein Lavoie proves to be more than loyal, yet Debois keeps testing and testing, inferences suggesting that Debois would just as easily replace Lavoie in his roster as not. This misrepresentation may convince audiences that *Dusk* is a film it very much isn't, one wrought with subterfuge as Lavoie tries to dodge both dogged gang force leader Burns and his boss. Instead, there's a great theme about Lavoie's choices making him a pawn no matter what he does because he refuses to live a peaceful life. Had the film taken just a bit of time in its 100-minute+ runtime to open up Lavoie's wife just a bit more, the intended emotional impact would likely feel far greater within the scope of what the film is versus what the marketing implies.



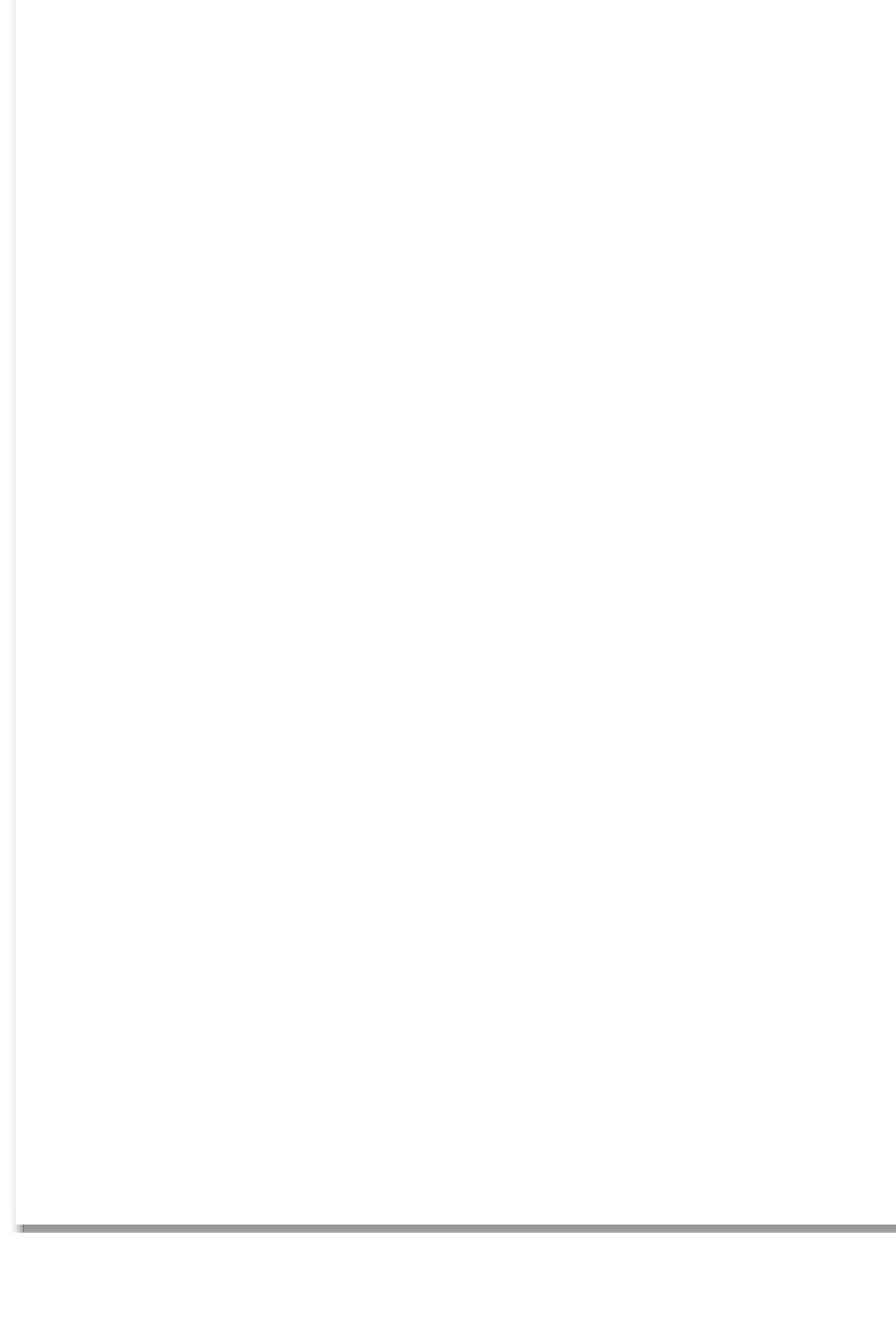
Center: Sylvain Marcel as Roger Burns in the action/thriller, *DUSK FOR A HITMAN*, a Saban Films release. Photo courtesy of Saban Films.

We often come to movies looking for a thrill, romance, or just a general escape. With this in mind, we often don't seek out films which play outside the rules of expectation. Marketers also struggle to figure out who a film is for and how to sell it when a film shies away from genre staples to tell its story. This is where *Dusk for a Hitman* resides, in that weird place between something different and as expected, often unable to decide which it wants to be. This leads to a frustrating experience as the performances from the cast draw you in, the direction of the narrative keeps us guessing, and the pathway to time-locked end is full of questions that beg answers. But if you're willing to experience *Dusk* as an allegory and not as a strict "based on a true story," there's a lesson to be learned about the cost of loyalty to the wrong person.

Available on VOD and digital April 19th, 2024.

For more information, head to Raymond St-Jean's official *Dusk for a Hitman* webpage.

Final Score: 3 out of 5.



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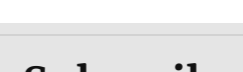
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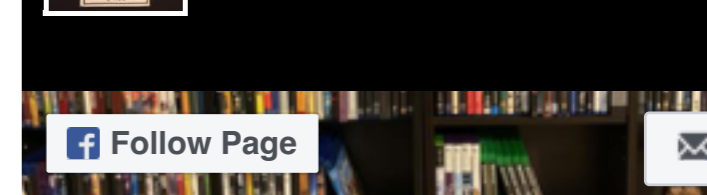
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