

STRONG FEMALE ANTAGONIST

“Dusk for a Hitman” Is a Brutal Story of Brotherly Love

Posted On



Familial bonds may be one of the strongest forces on earth, but there are many different types of families one can be a part of. Competing for our allegiance are members of the clan we're born into and those from the chosen families we've adopted for ourselves. Regardless of where our ultimate loyalties lie, the ties that bind often cause a great deal of pain. Raymond St-Jean's film *Dusk for a Hitman* pits two types of families against each other as one man must decide who deserves his undying devotion. Is it the mob family that offers him wealth and protection... for now ... or a complicated relationship with his own flesh and blood that may destroy the happy life he's built for himself?

In 1982 Donald Lavoie became the star witness in a series of trials intended to take down the infamous Montreal South-West mob. With intimate knowledge of 27 murders, fifteen of which he carried out himself, but the true amount of blood spilt by this dangerous man will never be known. St-Jean's film tells a fictionalized version of this fascinating story set in the final year of Lavoie's deadly career.

Played by Québécois actor Éric Bruneau, Lavoie is a stoic husband and father who's suave demeanor and sensitive eyes hide a talent for cold-blooded murder. As a trusted strongman for Claude Dubois (Benoît Gouin), he routinely dispatches enemies and associates alike, pulling the trigger without hesitancy or remorse. When his chaotic brother Carl (Simon Landry-Desy) lobbies for a place in the Dubois organization, Lavoie's carefully constructed life begins to fall apart. Hoping to test his loyalty, Dubois orders his best strongman to carry out a hit on Carl, causing Lavoie to choose between his professional life and his brother's survival.

St-Jean makes clear from the outset that many details in his version of the story have been changed. While Lavoie really did escape his own death warrant by slipping down a laundry shoot, the order wasn't sparked by a refusal to kill his own kin. Loosely based on reality, St-Jean seems more interested in exploring the inner life of a notorious killer rather than presenting an accurate timeline. Many elements have been added or amplified to heighten the tension and increase our sympathy for this suave devil. A scene playing over the final credits sees Lavoie give an interview in which he walks the audience through the basics of premeditated murder. This shocking coda was based on a real conversation, televised in 1983, between the infamous criminal and Canadian investigative journalist Hana Gartner. Following a relatively sympathetic portrait of this calculated hitman, it's a cold reminder that no matter how endearing Bruneau's depiction, the man on screen might kill us without a second thought.

Bruneau is the film's standout in a nuanced performance that adds depth to a notoriously heartless crime figure. The veteran actor brings a sensitivity to the role and manages to make us root for this cold-blooded assassin to make it out alive. The few moments in which his stoic demeanor breaks are both terrifying and heartbreaking, reminding us that seething rage and sorrow are buried under the surface of his stony facade. St-Jean includes verified details of Lavoie's early life to further explain his dark path in adulthood. As a child, Lavoie and his three siblings were sent by their parents to live in an orphanage for unknown reasons. St-Jean's implications of abuse may or may not be true, but we do know that this abandonment led to an adolescence filled with petty crimes and violence. Having lost his relationship with Claude Dubois, Lavoie seems to find a father figure in Detective Sergeant Roger Burns (Sylvain Marcel) who offers him protection in exchange for evidence and tries to help the ostensibly remorseful killer turn over a new leaf.

In addition to Bruneau's skillful performance, St-Jean sets the film in a world of late 70s/early 80s cool. Leather jackets, ruffled tuxedos, and polyester abound combined with an upbeat french soundtrack that keeps the subject matter from drifting too far into darkness. Though much of the plot rests on Lavoie's decision to turn state's witness, the story is filled with thrilling twists and turns. Lavoie shoots and stabs his way through Montreal, leaving a trail of bloody bodies in his wake. St-Jean's film is a harrowing and heartbreaking exploration of a real-life monster who turns out to have a beating heart lurking within an ice-cold facade.

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