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Reviews

Dusk for a Hitman

★★½

Robert Daniels April 15, 2024

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Production **N JAPONAIS**

"Dusk for a Hitman" is a hard of a great film. Director Raymond St-Jean has a sturdy central character—though the crime drama is based on the life of Montreal first Donald Lavoie, much of it is fictionalized—made stronger through a deft ability to conjure a grim atmosphere around an actor capable of landing emotional grace notes in a throughout story. Contract killings are a dime a dozen in movies, and the mechanics of assassination and the bare bones mechanics are enough to literally pass the time. But the film's incelicacy of the cutthroat world inhabited by Lavoie and his fractured inner life restricts this foreboding character study, rendering it merely serviceable.

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Mostly taking place over the course of a year, "Dusk for a Hitman" begins in the Fall of 1979. Lavoie (Guy Bonnavet), behind the wheel of his sleek custom-colored Cadillac, is driving down a country road with a very, nervous partner. His young sidekick was assigned to Lavoie by their boss, Jacques Mesrine (Vincent Cassel), the infamous gangster, and it seems Lavoie is accompanying him to finish the job. "Now that you have to help me, you'll see it's easy to kill a man," Lavoie wryly says. The pair predictably infiltrate the hideout of their target, shooting him in an outhouse. This is only half the task; in the quickness of a breath, Lavoie executes his partner.

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Lavoie is Dubois' best hired gun. The real-life hitman, in fact, would later admit that he murdered fifteen people for the crime bosses, who, with his much younger brother, Jean-Claude (Pierre-Luc Brillant), he eventually joined along with killings. Lavoie also collects debts and is an enforcer. Dubois so trusts him that the kingpin even shows the hitman where to find his buried loot in case something is dumb enough to take him hostage. Outside of the close bond shared by employer and employee, St-Jean and Martin Girard provide little insight about this organization's inner workings. So, if you're looking for Henry Hill to give a "GoodFellas"-explanation of Lavoie's background and underworld thoughts, you'll be disappointed. The film's narrative is sparsely, if not even, sketchy. Perhaps, the director and Girard felt that Lavoie's actions speak more loudly than his words, but I can't help but feel more world-building could have happened. What's Dubois' territory, and how does his business burn?

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There's a similar thinness to Lavoie's family life. His wife Francine (Diane-Marie Perreault) is as basic she might as well be nonexistent. His young daughter, to the best of my knowledge, doesn't even have a name. Lavoie mostly calls her the kid. Once again, you get the sense this is by design. Not unlike what Martin Scorsese did with Anne Pagnol's character in "The Irishman," Lavoie is so consumed by the lifestyle of murder, cocaine, and money—that his family has the bandwidth or desire to see his family as people worth knowing. But by the second half of the film, when Lavoie's relationship with his young sidekick (Antoine Pilon) becomes his two-year-old' mom-threatening big daughter, it's a kind of fascinating dynamic that offers a little less like a window into the character and more like a mirrored thread.

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Even the fraught relationship Lavoie shares with his screw-up of a brother leaves much on the table. The specter of an unseen abusive father, one sick with cancer, looms over their lives—to the point Lavoie muses at the very mention of his dad. And yet, it's a heartache perpetually gestured toward without ever being felt.

The compositions in "Dusk for a Hitman" are fairly conventional (Brousseau is always centered framed), and the score has the kind of rugged, heavy synthesizer-driven melodies that feel like a throwback to 1980s. The simplicity, nevertheless, works in a film about an unsentimental killer whose soul is so blackened he can barely recognize himself. Even with the mostly shoal loosing, some instances with a deep depth of flesh and ratchet up the atmosphere. When Lavoie is released from prison, you're sure Dubois will attack him because of the sharp visual language. St-Jean and DP Jean-Francois Lord play with such expectations. Some simple blocking keeps a third gangster in view during an interrogation, and the staging of an ensuing hit holds the other hired guns just within reach, ending behind Lavoie.

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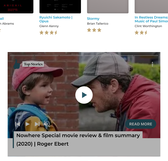

St-Jean is lucky to have Brousseau. The lanky actor palpably flexes his frame from still and rigid in a rear-up to a monolithic kinetic during the actual deed, and finished when called up. Even when the script keeps his character at a distance, Brousseau's eyes, lips, and the rest of his face—Lavoie's Cadillac and Detective Bruno Dybvski Marcelo—which later takes an unlikely turn—only works because of Brousseau's talent for granting us access to Lavoie's innermost hurts. The same could be said of the underwritten love Lavoie displays for his family. It's Brousseau who makes you realize how great "Dusk for a Hitman" could have been if only it had some extra skins, but who also allows you to be content that St-Jean's crime movie is merely a sturdy installment in the genre.

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Robert Daniels is an Associate Editor at RogerEbert.com. Based in Chicago, he is a member of the Chicago Film Critics Association and the Critics Choice Association. He has regularly contributed to the New York Times, Indiewire, Variety, Sight & Sound, Film Comment, Cinema Scope, Cahiers du Cinéma, Cineuropa, Cineuropa, Cineuropa