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Movie Review

Dust (2001)

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FILM REVIEW; Gunfight at the Old Macedonian Corral: A Western With a Flexible Compass

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Milcho Manchevski's stylized western, "Dust," is a potent, assured and ambitious piece of filmmaking brought down by weighted dialogue and, playing Americans, the British actors Adrian Lester and Joseph Fiennes and the Australian David Wenham. This dazzling and dazed movie begins on the streets of contemporary New York, as a camera moseys down a street and then crawls up the side of a building, peering into several windows as various apartment dwellers play out their lives. It's as if Mr. Manchevski were thumbing through a selection of stories as we watch, deciding which appeal to him the most.

He and "Dust" settle on a darkened room that Edge (Mr. Lester) has just broken into. He's prowling the apparently empty place for valuables, casting around and finding nothing but old photographs, some of which seem to date to the beginning of the 20th century. He is surprised in his dirty work by the place's elderly inhabitant, Angela (Rosemary Murphy). He hits her, but before he can escape, she whips out a large antique -- but still functional -- six-shooter and proceeds to prattle on about her life. Her tale, unfolding in black-and-white, is the story of two brothers, the lusty outlaw Luke (Mr. Wenham) and the virtuous, religious Elijah (Mr. Fiennes).

Their story starts in the Old West, with a fight over a prostitute (Anne Brochet), whom they both love and Elijah marries. The resulting envy and bitterness send Luke fleeing to Macedonia. After seeing a silent film about the region and its lawlessness -- an external turmoil obviously meant to mirror his own inner conflicts -- and a bandit known as Teacher (Vlado Jovanoski) with a huge price on his head, Luke also decides it's a place to make his fortune.

Mr. Manchevski suavely shuffles his various narratives, sometimes smoothly presenting the juxtaposed tales and on other occasions cutting violently from one story to another. The literal violence -- gun battles and punches detonating all over both stories and leaving a spray of intentional

confusion -- is staged with bracing clarity.

When Luke arrives in Macedonia, the screen is deluged with hot, bright desert colors that are oddly soothing to him given the foreign locale. The director signals that he is as unreliable a narrator as Angela because communicating emotion is more important than relaying facts in "Dust." He wants to convey the sense of being torn, which both Luke and Edge feel. Edge is hustling for money because a pair of thugs he owes are slowly -- and happily -- breaking parts of his skeleton piece by piece until they're repaid.

Mr. Manchevski demonstrates his gifts as a visual stylist and a filmmaker in command of the technical aspect of the medium. The constant onslaught of information -- sounds and pictures -- quiets down, and by the end everything makes sense, to the extent that it needs to. (He even uses howls of despair and pain as transitions.) The scenes that act as triggers to propel us into the dual stories work amazingly well.

"Dust," which opens today in New York and Los Angeles, almost has the feel of a spaghetti western made by Bryan Singer, who demonstrated the same superlative skills of legerdemain in "The Usual Suspects," in which the point was also to keep the audience off guard and consistently move the balance of power among the protagonists.

But Mr. Singer recognized that the best way to such mastery of craft was in a plot that didn't seek to make emotional demands; his film was essentially an urban legend told over a campfire, with pieces added for spice just when the audience thought it knew where the film was headed.

Mr. Manchevski employed a similar splintered-storytelling approach to insinuate the plot of his ingeniously realized "Before the Rain," in which the slivers of apparently haphazardly scattered plot all came together. (In that film the Godardian cubist style was buttressed by titles that acted as chapter headings.)

"Dust" takes this ghost story approach while simultaneously trying to limn a film rife with dovetailing displays of devices like parallels and metaphor, trying to use all these elements to explicate character. Both Luke and Edge undergo a series of tests, obstacles they must conquer to understand what they are, and are not.

Luke's baptism of faith comes in his time with Neda (Nikolina Kujaca), a pregnant peasant angel in Macedonia, and his attention to her is eventually tangled with another skirmish between Teacher's forces and his opponents. The scale is almost as biblical as the Scripture quoted by the underwritten, and overaccented Elijah. Mr. Wenham rises to the challenges of material that

requires his growth to come in a profusion of stages.

Edge's trial pushes him to overcome selfishness, but the presence of Angela in his life is also a parallel. It is overly convenient, and such an underexplained mystery that it never makes any sense. There's enough culture clash that "Dust" doesn't need the equivalent of a Zen koan.

"Dust" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It has strong language, thunderous violence and so much blood it seems to be used as floor wax. DUST Written and directed by Milcho Manchevski; director of photography, Barry Ackroyd; edited by Nic Gaster; music by Kiril Dzajkovski; production designer, David Munns; produced by Chris Auty, Vesna Jovanoska and Domenico Procacci; released by Lions Gate Films. At the AMC Empire 25, 42nd Street at Eighth Avenue. Running time: 127 minutes. This film is rated R. WITH: Joseph Fiennes (Elijah), David Wenham (Luke), Adrian Lester (Edge), Anne Brochet (Lilith), Nikolina Kujaca (Neda), Rosemary Murphy (Angela) and Vlado Jovanoski (Teacher).



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2.

August 23rd, 2003

Rating:

what is dust?

It is hard for me to talk about this movie without thinking of all the reviews and things heard about it from other people - the movie was released in Macedonia immediately after it was made and two years later in the USA. In those two years it got so much negative critique from the film elite so that it will be hard for any mortal to admit they liked the movie.So I'll be one of those mortals and speak in favor of the movie. It not only chronicles a period from the Macedonian history but through contemporary references it helps us understand the 'mystery' of the Balkan psyche and the ongoing collective traumatization of these people by the 'powers of the civilized world'.It is an intelligent story that shifts between reference points of the narrator, listener and the protagonist while maintaining it's epic and adventuristic dimension.The art direction and locations are so beautifully contrived, defining the Macedonian identity in such a successfully manner while escaping self-exploitation and exoticism so prevalent in cinemas of the 'developing' nations.If there was one thing that bothered me it was

how over-accentuated certain dramatic parts of the story were, speaking of some insecurity on the director's part.□□If I am to say something good about the director, I will commend him on the courage to tell a story that is hard to pitch as a box office hits hybrid, but it stands alone as a masterpiece.

- *julija*

1.

August 22nd, 2003

Rating:

after the rain

A few years passed since the *Before The Rain* and now *Dust*. Once again Manchevski creates a masterpiece. Every detail is carefully planned. You can see the effort and attention in every second of the movie. The structure of the film again is unique. The story is told in such a strange way, almost confusing but also tempting and breathtaking. It is a story told by an old lady about life, death, souls, people, life and love.

- *olivera2*