

Megan Fox as Jennifer, a reigning high school princess whose tendency to tear classmates to pieces takes a literal turn when she's accidentally transformed into a succubus as a result of a run-in with a sleazy rocker who mistakenly believes she's a virgin and sacrifices her to the powers of darkness. From then on, she seduces male classmates and devours them while her BFF, Needy (Amanda Seyfried), tries to stop the carnage—especially when she fears that her own boyfriend is in Jennifer's sights. Obviously, Cody meant to turn the teen-horror template full circle by making guys the victims (with a subtext about female empowerment), and she does contribute a few sharp, knowing lines (often with pop culture references and current slang), while also occasionally constructing an entire scene that cleverly riffs on conventions (a sequence at a deserted swimming pool, for instance, is a brilliant spoof of horror film inanity). But much of *Jennifer's Body* just seems ordinary—little different from the movies it's supposedly sending up, and while Cody deserves credit for trying to pump new blood into a stale genre, the odd moments of inspired cleverness aren't sufficient to make this movie a new *Heathers*. Not recommended. (F. Swietek)



Lemon Tree ★★★
IFC, 106 min., in Arabic & Hebrew w/English subtitles, not rated, DVD: \$19.99

Israeli filmmakers have been adept at fashioning parables that embody their revulsion at the country's treatment of Palestinians. The second such film from writer-director Eran Riklis, whose earlier *The Syrian Bride* [see VL 5/06] was an absurdist comedy-drama about a wedding undone by complications at a border crossing in the Golan Heights, *Lemon Tree* takes a more serious approach. Salma Zidane (Hiam Abbass) is a beautiful widow who scrupulously tends the family lemon grove her father planted at their homestead on the West Bank border. However, its existence is threatened when the new Israeli defense minister, Israel Navon (Doron Tavori), builds a mansion next door and the grove is condemned for security reasons. Faced with an order that the trees be removed, Salma decides to challenge the decision in court, and the dispute becomes an international cause célèbre—as well as a cinematic metaphor for the wall that Israel is building to separate itself from the Palestinian territories. Fortunately, Riklis doesn't hammer home the analogy, Abbass plays her part with wonderful restraint, and the proceedings are leavened with an amusing subplot involving a sad-sack Israeli



soldier stationed at the guard tower on the minister's property. In fact, the only heavy-handed narrative thread turns out to be the haltingly romantic relationship between the widow and her lawyer, which pushes the film uncomfortably toward melodrama. But it's a minor flaw in a story that comes down clearly on the Palestinian side but does so without simply caricaturing the Israelis. Recommended. (F. Swietek)

Lili and the Baobab ★★★
Casque d'Or, 90 min., in French w/English subtitles, not rated, DVD: \$24.95

When 33-year-old French photojournalist Lili (Romane Bohringer) arrives in the remote desert town of Agnam Lidoubé in Senegal, the villagers greet her with great fanfare, an indication that they don't often receive Western visitors. Lili gets to know the townspeople, including Aminata (Aminata Zaaria), a shy single woman who serves her tea, as she takes their pictures. Her guide finds it curious that she has no brothers or sisters, while the women think it's odd that she has no husband or children. After she returns to Cherbourg, Lili meets Moussa (Saïdou Abatcha), who works abroad to support his family in Agnam, and through him she finds out that Aminata has given birth to a son (Lili had no idea Aminata was pregnant). Because she has no spouse, the village will force the young woman to leave, so Lili returns to Senegal with Moussa to prevent that from happening; but the situation is more complicated than she realizes. In the end, the lesson here isn't so much that one person can make a difference, but that not every Aminata will be lucky enough to have a Lili when they need one. First-time feature filmmaker Chantal Richard's observant direction occasionally recalls the work of the late Ousmane Sembène (*Black Girl*, *Moolaadé*), who also often focused on the plight of Senegalese women. Recommended. (K. Fennessy)



Lion's Den ★★★
Strand, 113 min., in Spanish w/English subtitles, not rated, DVD: \$27.99

"Women in prison" movies don't have an especially good reputation, but Pablo Trapero's *Lion's Den* stands apart. Set in Argentina, the film presents a serious study of Julia (Martina Gusman), a pregnant woman accused of murdering her lover, who delivers her baby while incarcerated and raises her son for years behind bars as her case moves slowly through the judicial system. She's aided by her sympathetic cellmate, Marta (Laura García), with whom she develops a close (indeed, sexual) relationship, but in time her own estranged mother



(Elli Medeiros) arrives, intending to take the child and raise him herself, setting the stage for a rather melodramatic final act that strains credulity. Despite the overwrought finale and occasional descents into genre clichés (with lesbian overtones and inmate fights), most of *Lion's Den* maintains a stark, quasi-documentary tone. The actual prison locations give the film a grimly realistic feel that makes the sight of kids playing in such a bleak environment even more incongruous, while Gusman delivers a thoroughly convincing performance as Julia, whose guilt is deliberately left uncertain. Offering a strong portrayal of the maternal instinct while also illustrating the difficulty of deciding what's best for the children of imprisoned women, this absorbing drama is recommended. (F. Swietek)

Lorna's Silence ★★★
Sony, 105 min., in French w/English subtitles, R, DVD: \$28.98, Jan. 5

The fraternal writing-directing team of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne continue their series of films focusing on Belgium's urban poor, told in gritty semi-documentary style. Their newest isn't the equal of *Rosetta* or *L'Enfant*, but it's still powerful, centering on Lorna (Arta Dobroschi), a young Albanian caught up in a marriage-for-sale immigration scheme. Her sham marriage to a pathetically needy junkie named Claudy (Jérémy Renier) will earn her citizenship; but her sleazy boss, Fabio (Fabrizio Rongione), plans for her husband to die of an overdose so that she can wed a wealthy Russian who wants a passport. The scheme troubles Lorna, who tries to secure a quick divorce instead, but her plans go awry. The Dardennes present this story in an allusive, fragmentary style, compelling viewers to work out the connections and read motives into the characters' actions in order to link them into a coherent whole. Yet the film doesn't go where one might expect—an abrupt shift takes the story in another direction and Lorna to an ethical crossroads—in this searing parable of the possibility of redemption. No one else working in film today treats the circumstances of society's marginalized members as realistically as the Dardennes, who here capture the harsh reality of the modern underclass while injecting a note of moral hopefulness into what might otherwise have been a bleak and heartless tale. Recommended. (F. Swietek)



The Merry Gentleman ★★★1/2
Genius, 96 min., R, DVD: \$19.95

Michael Keaton makes his directorial debut with *The Merry Gentleman*, a two-pronged character study shot in shades of noir. Kelly Macdonald stars as Kate Frazier, who decides to leave her abusive husband, Michael (Bobby Cannavale), and catches a plane to Illinois