

MOVIE CITY NEWS

MCN

Robert Mitchum Is Dead

Charlie Casanova

Despite the inference in the title, “Robert Mitchum Is Dead” is neither a documentary, nor a dark homage to the noir classics in which he appeared. The hard-boiled leading man is present in Olivier Babinet and Fred Kihn’s beyond-quirky first feature only in spirit and the occasional visual or spoken reference. Chief among them is the famously self-deprecating line about his acting skills, “One of the greatest movie stars was Rin Tin Tin. It can’t be too much of a trick.” Beyond that, the festival-favorite has more in common with the early “road” pictures of Jim Jarmusch and Aki Kaurismaki’s “Leningrad Cowboys Go America,” in which Jarmusch has a cameo as a used-car salesman. If you were struck by anything in the previous sentence, there’s at least a fighting chance you’ll enjoy “Robert Mitchum Is Dead.” It chronicles a journey taken by a cheeseball talent agent, Arsene (Olivier Gourmet), and an insomniac actor with a gift for mimicry, Franky (Pablo Nicomedes), from a film shoot at a Polish university to a festival held in a tent somewhere north of the Arctic Circle, in Norway. It’s there that the American director, Mr. Sarrineff, who once directed Mitchum in a movie, is scheduled to appear as the guest of honor. Lacking in resources, the pair relies on stolen cars and the gullibility of easily impressed strangers to reach their destination. Also along for the ride is an African musician (Bakary Sangare) whose eerie synth music might be a better fit for a Martian noir than the rockabilly band in which he currently labors. The film’s episodic form may not be everyone’s idea of a good time, but any longtime admirer of Jarmusch won’t have any problem with it. It arrives with making-of featurette.

Movies in which the protagonist and antagonist are one and the same character demand a great deal of patience and fortitude from an audience. If that character also happens to be an unrepentant sociopath, the filmmaker’s task is that much more difficult. Only the best actors can pull it off with any credibility. Anytime a vile character, real or imagined, is portrayed by an actor of substance — Billy the Kid, as played by Paul Newman and Kris Kristofferson, for example — the screenwriter and director are going the fudge the truth to preserve the actor’s public image. Charlize Theron won an Oscar as Best Lead Actress for her frightening portrayal of a murderous prostitute in “Monster,” as much for her courage as a professional as her excellent performance. (By contrast, the film’s writer/director, Patty Jenkins, has only found work and not much of it in television.) In Nicolas Winding Refn’s powerful portrait of a criminal beyond redemption, “Bronson,” Tom Hardy delivered a performance that was the equal of any of the fine lead actors nominated that year. Aside from the fact that “Bronson” made no money, it was exactly the kind of drama most academy members would turn off after the first 20 minutes. As terrific as Nicolas Cage’s portrayal of a suicidal, alcoholic screenwriter was in “Leaving Las Vegas,” it’s fair to wonder if he would have won the Best Actor prize if he weren’t of noble Hollywood blood. In the year in which “Braveheart” won Best Picture, “Leaving Las Vegas” wasn’t even nominated.

All of that is a long way of saying that Emmett Scalan’s tour-de-force portrayal of a total scumbag in “**Charlie Casanova**” is worth the effort to rent, but no one should expect to come away from the experience unscarred. The title character of Terry McMahon’s unforgiving Irish drama is a wealthy ego-maniac who feels the world owes him a living and if anything he’s done has harmed another human, well, it isn’t his fault. In Charlie’s mind, his detractors are merely envious of his privileged status and ability to avoid

punishment. They'd do the same thing if they were in his shoes, he reckons. We know this because in the aftermath of an accident in which he kills a pedestrian, he determines how he will deal with it by drawing from a deck of cards while among friends. When brought in for interrogation by police, Charlie insults their working-class roots and educations he deems inferior to his own. If his friends fear his mood swings, they are too easily won over by his glib, rapid-fire braggadocio. As an "alpha male," he refuses to be guided by the morals of lesser beings, which is to say, everyone else in his orbit.

And yet, Scalan's portrayal of this unrepentant elitist could hardly be any more forceful or penetrating. The soliloquies he performs at a comedy club's amateur night reveal a man who understands exactly the nature of his disease, where to find the root cause of his evil deeds and why he won't change his ways. If no one outside a handful of festivals, including SXSW, was able to see Scalan's bravura turn on the big screen, the blame can be traced to the fact that "Charlie Casanova" was deemed to be far too unappetizing for human consumption by distributors. It deeply divided critics and audiences without providing a safe middle ground for lively debate or compromise. McMahon was roasted and toasted in equal measure, with the toxicity of the negative reviews reaching levels previously reserved for "Showgirls," "Heaven's Gate" and "Battlefield Earth." Finding positive traction in muck that deep is pretty difficult, though. The one thing "Charlie Casanova" shares with "Robert Mitchum Is Dead" is the niche distributor BrinkVision, a company that "strives for an audience that, while demanding innovative and original entertainment, knows the struggles associated with that endeavor, and is willing to support the cause." Someone's got to do it. – Gary Dretzka

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