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Friday September 18th, 7.30pm

Mommy (15)

dir: Xavier Dolan

starring: Anne Dorval, Antoine Olivier Pilon, Suzanne Clément

sponsor: Dr Roderick Ørner Ltd and Michelle Allen, Psychological Therapies and Consultancy Services

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The mobile photography application Instagram, which now has more than 150 million monthly users, has become one of the current generation's premier mediums for (over)sharing personal images at a moment's notice. It's apt, then, that the prolific Québécois Xavier Dolan - who is now, remarkably, on his 5th feature at the tender age of 25 - has cribbed Instagram's boxy, constricting 1:1 aspect ratio to frame his latest effort. From its plaintive title to its histrionic ending, *Mommy* is a claustrophobic, incessantly heart-on-sleeve family melodrama that unfolds, for better or worse, with zero filter.

Mommy finds Dolan returning to the territory he explored in his eye-catching debut *I Killed My Mother* (2009): the fraught relationship between a single mother and her son. As explained in a portentous opening title-card, *Mommy* is set in a fictional, vaguely dystopian Canada that has passed a controversial new law allowing parents to abandon their behaviourally disturbed children. This information becomes relevant when yellow-haired, ADHD-afflicted tearaway Steve (Antoine Olivier Pilon) is expelled from a juvenile institution for starting a fire and released back into the custody of his bolshie yet vulnerable widowed mother Diane (Anne Dorval): it's a situation that cannot, one suspects, end well. *Mommy*'s stressful opening stages track the attempts of this terrible twosome - who seem locked in an endless battle to out-pout, out-shout and out-snarl each other - to regain their bearings in each other's company. Dolan's tight framing accentuates their cacophonous existence, all screening rows,



violent encounters and barely suppressed oedipal tension in cluttered environments.

Though the commitment displayed by Pilon and Dorval is commendable, it's something of a relief - and a dramaturgical boon - when their blazing relationship is triangulated by Kyla (Suzanne Clément, who projects an appealingly inscrutable aura). The timid Kyla, who suffers from a speech impediment, offers succour to both Steve and Diane, who end up fighting for her attention in different ways. As in Dolan's previous few films (*Heartbeats*, *Laurence Anyways*, *Tom at the Farm* - shown by LFS last season), there's a refreshingly fluid, amorphous approach to sexuality and gender roles here, from Steve's periodic cross-dressing to the teasing hints of a relationship blossoming between the two women and the sense that a very modern family unit is being formed. It's no coincidence that Kyla's distant husband - the straightest, squarest character on show - is a spectral presence who's banished to the margins of the screen. Some of the film's best moments arrive in the electric scenes where Dolan's merciless framing pushes these two lonely women closer and closer together.

Aptly, an inspired framing choice accounts for *Mommy*'s best moment. Midway through, when things seem to be looking up for Steve, the camera tracks him fluidly as he glides down the street on his skateboard. Then, with a beatific smile on his face, he stretches his arms wide, and pulls the frame out into sun-dappled

Synopsis: Quebec, the present. Canada has passed a controversial new law allowing parents to abandon their behaviourally disturbed children. Diane, in her 40s and recently widowed, is once again living with her 15-year old, ADHD-sufferer son Steve after he has been expelled from a juvenile detention centre for starting a fire. The pair fight and argue. Mysterious neighbour Kyla - a married teacher - is soon involved in their lives; she becomes firm friends with Diane, and helps to educate Steve. During one teaching session, Steve and Kyla have a spectacular argument, which ends with a stressed Steve accidentally urinating on himself. They reconcile. Diane is served with a \$250,000 lawsuit from the parents of a child who was burned in the fire started by Steve. Diane begins dating neighbour Paul, a lonely lawyer, in the hope that he might be able to offer legal & financial advice; however, their nightclub date goes horribly wrong. In a supermarket, a distressed Steve attempts suicide by slashing his wrist with a Stanley knife.

In a dream sequence, Steve graduates, grows up and has children. The dream sequence ends and it is revealed that Diane has driven Steve to another juvenile detention institution. Later, Kyla tells a tearful Diane that she is moving to Toronto. Steve attempts to escape from the institution.

Credits

Diane 'Die': Anne Dorval

Kyla: Suzanne Clément

Steve: Antoine Olivier Pilon

Paul: Patrick Huard

Patrick: Alexandre Goyette

principal: Michèle Lituac

Marthe: Viviane Pascal

Natasha: Natalie Hamel-Roy

Director: Xavier Dolan

Screenplay/Editing: Xavier Dolan

DoP: André Turpin

Original music: Noia

Canada 2014. 138 mins

widescreen with him. In this audacious moment, Dolan marries his penchant for heightened artifice (there are similar, subtler moments in *Tom at the Farm*) with a genuine emotional clout. When Diane and Steve receive some subsequent bad news, and the frame shrinks meekly back into its square, the effect is devastating. Yet when Dolan pulls the same trick again later, it's divested of comparable heft: the novelty has already worn off, and it plays more like a type of self-conscious show-boating that Dolan's harshest critics (who sharpened their knives when he shared the Jury Prize with old-school formal jester Jean-Luc Godard's *Goodbye to Language* at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival) frequently charge him with.

There is evidence elsewhere in *Mommy* of Dolan simply trying too hard. For one thing, 140 minutes is a long time to spend telling a fairly straightforward, small-scale story. And some of the music choices are gauche - though perhaps Dolan deserves some credit for attempting to wring pathos from 'Blue', a particularly ingratiating mid-90s ditty by Europop outfit Eiffel 65.

Ultimately though, despite Dolan's excesses, *Mommy* rarely feels like a cynical exercise in style and showmanship. Instead, the compassion that the young director evinces for his characters shines through, and it's refreshing to see an unconventional drama with two determinedly unorthodox female characters at its core. Dorval in particular does particularly fine work in keeping the brassy Diane away from the limiting pitfalls of camp.

Another view: David Ehrlich (Little White Lies)

Director Xavier Dolan's *Mommy* is not a dystopian film, but the one small tweak it makes to the present looms large, swinging in and out of focus like the Sword of Damocles hung with too much slack. The film begins with a series of title cards that introduce viewers to an alternate Canada in which a controversial new law has empowered parents to permanently forfeit custody of minors, institutionalising problem children who've become too difficult to raise.

However cowardly and inhumane such a law might seem, Steve (Antoine-Olivier Pilon) is the feral kind of youth who makes it sound like a good idea. Performed with the unchecked abandon previously reserved for Lars von Trier heroines, Steve is a mother's worst nightmare — not because he's such a terror, but because his destructive mania (insufficiently written off as ADHD) so obviously forms a protective shell around a tender heart, racing with wayward love. For a parent of someone like that, it's the hope that hurts the most.

The legislation introduced at the top of Dolan's unforgettable new film — as bluntly stated as it is quickly tucked away — may seem like a lazy and underdeveloped screenwriting crutch, but that small bit of world-building lurks in every shadow of this 139-minute gauntlet, challenging Steve's mother to give up. The suspense that the title cards instil for the audience, who know that Die (Dolan mainstay Anne Dorval) will eventually surrender her son, is no match for that which burdens the woman herself, who is forced to consider that she could.

Die, of course, is no angel — her name is short for Diane, but she insists on keeping the “e” in there, lest anyone dare think this working class single mother is easily pitied or preyed upon. Brash and unfiltered, Die is the kind of woman who opens her mouth even wider when you catch her chewing gum, and though it would be an understatement to say that her relationship with Steve is messy and prone to wild fluctuations, one thing

is immediately clear from the moment she retrieves her son from a juvenile detention centre at the start of the film: Steve wasn't adopted.

They share a rather large house on an unremarkable block in suburban Quebec, their shrill personalities ballooning to fill the empty space left by the death of Steve's father three years prior. As Steve careens from one tantrum to the next, desperately trying to be all of the men who Die might be missing from her life, their home hardens into a live grenade, and the only person capable of holding down the pin is Steve and Die's shy, stuttering new neighbour, Kyla (Suzanne Clément, another Dolan regular). The three of them are able to alchemise some kind of tenuous stability, but it can't last.

Answering for his much-discussed decision to shoot the film in a 1:1 aspect ratio (a perfect square resembling an Instagram photo), Dolan has said that the claustrophobic frame was intended to keep his ornamentalism in check — some have accused his past work of being flamboyant to a fault, and a criticism *Mommy* resists by restoring a Dreyerlike attention to the faces of his actors. But for an aesthete like Dolan, every stylistic obstruction registers its negative dimension, and what's omitted from the picture lands with the same impact as that which remains.

The aspect ratio isn't ascetic, it's just a different shade of flamboyance, and Dolan does such magically simple things with it. *Mommy* is so affecting in part because Dolan's style has finally struck up a perfectly fluent dialogue with his characters, the saturated richness of his melodrama blossoming into a rare emotional purity — his characters have always been candid, but here they feel genuinely raw.

This sublime harmony between substance in style is underscored by the film's soundtrack, which is stunted sometime around the late '90s. Preemptively taking a page from *Guardians of the Galaxy* Steve is hung up on a mix CD that his father had made before his death, and so the soundtrack is dominated throwbacks like Oasis, Counting Crows, and even Eiffel 65. The “gimmick”, like any part of a Dolan film that's often described as such, returns our attention to the root power of his world: kitsch without irony is love. And love is something that Dolan gets so right that it shines through everything else.

Cultural anachronisms are inherently funny, and it's natural to laugh with recognition at the first chords of Dido's 'White Flag.' But Dolan pushes through that, forcing viewers to hear the music from both sides, simultaneously appreciating it for both its humour and its honesty. And it's the same way with his characters. “A mother doesn't just wake up one day not loving her son,” Die tells Steve towards the end of the film, the promise of her words made all the more devastating by the confluence between how true they are, and how dislocated they feel from the time when they might have made a difference.

It goes without saying that Dolan is the only person who could make this film, but much of its lightning-in-a-bottle results from how he made it perfect time, the cinema's most talented wunderkind since Orson Welles straddling the divide between precocious adolescent and fully grown up auteur. Broadly speaking, it may be true that Steve is a manifestation of Dolan's wild excitability, Die his nascent responsibility and Kyla the superego trying to hold everything together, but what matters is that Dolan is able to empathise with them all.

He inspires his actors to rampage through the movie with intimate brilliance, and he shapes their material with the wisdom of someone who's acutely aware of his ongoing maturation, and the mutability it entails. Yes, Dolan is perversely accomplished for someone so young, but with *Mommy*, it feels like he's just the right age.

Our next film: Friday September 25th, 7.30pm

Pelo Malo (Venezuela, 2013. Cert 15)

There's nothing in any plot description of *Pelo Malo* ('Bad Hair') that can do justice to the subtlety of writer/director Mariana Rondón's achievements. With two combustible lead performances and a vibrant representation of the high-rise life among Venezuela's working poor, Rondón leads an assured dance through universal themes of poverty, family and sexuality with the lightest of touches, neither patronising or sentimentalising any of the characters or the issues.

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