

F I L M R E V I E W



The unbearable heaviness of being

Love gets in the way when a young woman attempts to escape her dreary life in Belgrade's criminal underworld

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Although set in a country that most of us know little about, and in an insular world that many of us would be hard-put to imagine, *Love and Other Crimes* (Ljubav i Drugi Zlocini) manages to come to grips with the complexity of human relationships in a way too many films that are set in worlds superficially more familiar fail to do.

Director Stefan Arsenijevic's point of departure is the observation, made by Cher back in 1991, that, "love hurts/love scars/love wounds and mars." Fortunately, he has dumped the bombast, and opted for a humorous treatment of this theme. The result is a delightfully tender comedy. It does not make fun of the hurts and scars of love, but makes us laugh in spite of the pain.

For Arsenijevic, love is not just about romance, it is about survival. All of the characters, not least Anica (Anica Dobra), the 30-something mistress of a small-time gangster who operates on the periphery of a rundown Belgrade housing estate, have seen too much and have few illusions. Yet they are human enough to have dreams, which sometimes they bring themselves to half believe in.

Anica is trying to make her dreams a reality. She wants to leave her life with crime boss Milutin, an older man, for the



freedom of the West. But she is no innocent, and knows, at least at second hand, the terrible hardships endured by friends who have made it to Western Europe. One of the film's most humorous sequences is built around this conflict between knowledge and hope, as Anica taunts the wimpy owner of a porn video shop about his wife, who has escaped to Europe: she's getting good sex from a new lover, but admits, even as she taunts him, that she also misses home, with all its deprivations, terribly.

Life in the housing estate has an appalling certainty about it; attempts to escape abroad, an appalling risk. It's all made so much more complex by the fact that Milutin is a good man who loves her, and that his enforcer Stanislav declares his

passion for her hours before she is set to steal Milutin's money and cross the border.

Milutin, suspecting Anica's plan, puts extra money into the safe to help her out. When Anica comes to steal the money, she can't even bring herself to take the entire stash. There is plenty of love in *Love and Other Crimes*, but it always seems to end up hurting someone.

In the background of these affairs of the heart, a small turf war rages between Stanislav and the thugs of a rival gang over a stall selling snacks and coffee that lies in disputed territory. The stand is torched by Stanislav as the owner watches in despair. The destruction is made all the worse by the pitifulness of the small corrugated iron structure.

The lives depicted in *Love and Other Crimes* are very small lives, but the characters play for the highest stakes imaginable: survival and sanity. All the characters, each in their own way, try unendingly to convince themselves that they are loved, even if the proof cuts them to the quick. Stanislav reports to his boss that his ex-wife has refused to forgive him, despite an ostentatious stunt involving dozens of roses. He sighs with satisfaction at this news: "That's how I know she still loves me," he says.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUNE ENTERTAINMENT



Conflict is the name of the game when an Israeli woman falls for a handsome Palestinian man. PHOTOS COURTESY OF HENET FILMS

Conflict zone love elicits cold comfort

Eytan Fox's tale of romance, which crosses political and religious divides, challenges the hackneyed line that love is all you need

BY JEANNETTE CATSOULIS
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Vacillating provocatively between romantic comedy and political tragedy, *The Bubble* is photographed with a sunny brightness that belies the gravity of its intentions.

Set primarily in the fashionable Sheinkin Street district of Tel Aviv, the story follows three left-leaning 20-somethings (two men and a woman) whose notion of political action is to hold a "rave against the occupation." But when Noam (Ohad Knoller), a sweet-natured music-store clerk and reserve soldier, meets a handsome Palestinian named Ashraf (Yusef Sweid), their escalating affair forces everyone to face reality in the cruelest possible way.

Squeezing a lot of conflict — sexual, ethnic and intellectual — into its 117 minutes, *The Bubble* is about the appeal of self-delusion and the warmth of comfort zones. Noam's best friend, Yali (Alon Friedmann), a cafe manager, reproaches Noam for habitually choosing unavailable men yet denies his own attraction to casually aggressive partners.

Meanwhile, Ashraf's fond sister (Roba Blal) and her future husband, a Hamas leader aptly named Jihad (Shredy Jabarin), negate Ashraf's homosexuality by coercing him into a straight relationship.

Eytan Fox directs with compassion but also with impatience for his characters' self-centered naivete, veering somewhat uneasily between these tones and relying on the competence of his actors to smooth the transitions. And though his ending is more poetic than just, it effectively diverts partisan sympathies toward a more general condemnation of violence. Fox may be a romantic, but he understands that love is rarely all you need.

Film Notes

LOVE AND OTHER CRIMES

DIRECTED BY: STEFAN ARSENIJEVIC

STARRING: ANICA DOBRA (ANICA), VUK KOSTIC (STANISLAV), MILENA DRAVIC (MOTHER), FEDJA STOJANOVIC (MILUTIN), HANNA SCHWAMBORN (IVANA), LJUBOMIR BANDOVIC (NIKOLA)

RUNNING TIME: 106 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

LANGUAGE: IN SERBO-CROATIAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

It is a wonderful ensemble performance that has a conviction and wit that easily overcome the drab surroundings and occasionally clunky editing. The humor is all the more memorable because of the undercurrent of bitterness and despair. Comparisons can be made with Zhang Yimou's (張藝謀) *To Live* (活着), which also finds dark humor in the condition of ordinary human beings striving heroically against insuperable odds in a world that cares nothing for them. *Love and Other Crimes* is a slighter work, without the big historical sweep, but it also has an intimacy and charm that make it very appealing. Arsenijevic seems to shrug his shoulders at this quietly despairing world that he presents, and say, "indeed, it is terrible, but it would be more unbearable still if you couldn't laugh at life's little tragedies."

Film Notes

THE BUBBLE

DIRECTED BY: EYTAN FOX

STARRING: OHAD KNOLLER (NOAM), YUSEF SWEID (ASHRAF), DANIELA WIRNER (LULU), ALON FRIEDMANN (YALI), ROBA BLAL (RANA), SHREDDY JABARIN (JIHAD)

RUNNING TIME: 117 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

LANGUAGE: IN HEBREW, ARABIC AND ENGLISH WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LONG SHENG ENTERTAINMENT

When you plan to die alone, prepare for lots of company

A man who is drinking himself to death must deal with his neighbors' attention when they see the face of Jesus in a stain that appears on the side of his house

BY STEPHEN HOLDEN
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

With characters named Esperanza, Dawn and Patience that signal Deeper Meaning, *Henry Poole Is Here* traffics in the kind of inspirational kitsch that only a true believer could swallow. Those convinced that faith can literally move mountains may welcome a film whose characters discuss spiritual issues, although there are no grand tectonic shifts in the landscape. In the film, directed by Mark Pellington (*Arlington Road*) from a screenplay by Albert Torres, the miracles wrought by feeling a mystical connection with a mysterious reddish stain on the side of a stucco house are less earthshaking and have to do with physical and mental health.

That house is purchased by Henry Poole (Luke Wilson), a

brooding American Everyman diagnosed with an unidentified terminal illness whose only visible symptoms are episodes of blotchy skin. Henry has returned to the Los Angeles neighborhood in which he grew up determined to die in slovenly solitude. While glumly waiting for the end, he comforts himself with vodka and Krispy Kreme doughnuts.

To his annoyance, his pesky neighbors refuse to leave him alone. The most persistent is the garrulous Mexican-American widow who lives next door, Esperanza (Adriana Barraza). She is the first to notice the stain, which contains a spot from which a bloodlike substance slowly drips. Certain that she has seen the face of God, she summons her pastor, Father Salazar (George Lopez), to inspect it,

Film Notes

HENRY POOLE IS HERE

DIRECTED BY: MARK PELLINGTON

STARRING: LUKE WILSON (HENRY POOLE), RADHA MITCHELL (DAWN STUPEK), ADRIANA BARRAZA (ESPERANZA), GEORGE LOPEZ (FATHER SALAZAR), CHERYL HINES (MEG WYATT), RACHEL SEIFERTH (PATIENCE), MORGAN LILY (MILLIE STUPEK)

RUNNING TIME: 104 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

and as word gets around, visitors begin arriving to worship at the supposedly holy site.



You've got to have faith to believe in Henry Poole Is Here. PHOTOS COURTESY OF LONG SHENG ENTERTAINMENT

Millie (Morgan Lily), an 8-year-old neighbor who hasn't said a word since the breakup of her parents' marriage, is also mysteriously drawn to the stain and miraculously begins talking again. Her beautiful, cookie-baking mother, Dawn (Radha Mitchell), just happens to be a perfect mate for Henry should he be roused from his morbid funk.

As Henry engages in furious verbal skirmishes with the true believers, Wilson offers a credible portrait of an angry, despairing man fending off a cult. But the film's spiritual deck is stacked. In the mawkish tradition of movies like *Simon Birch*, *Wide Awake*, *August Rush* and *Hearts in Atlantis*, *Henry Poole Is Here* is insufferable hokum that takes itself very, very seriously.