

What Happened Was...

Night falls on the city. A no-longer-young office worker hurries home to her modestly-furnished studio apartment. She breaks out a store-bought cake and readies a dish for the microwave. She fusses with her wardrobe before settling on a sleeveless shift. She adjusts the stereo, and, as the camera stays fixed, she flits in and out of the film frame, tidying up. Expectant but nervous, she is so surprised by a knock at the door that she knocks a knickknack to the floor and buries the smashed pieces in her aquarium. Her dinner guest is early...

Such is the set-up for *What Happened Was...*, a two-character study originally written for the stage by actor Tom Noonan, who has converted his theater piece into a provocative little independent movie. (As a film, it won the Grand Jury Prize at last year's Sundance Film Festival of independent film.) Hermetic, a bit menacing, often goofy, the film will capture movie goers who are captured by its two protagonists and want to see what happens next. If you don't get "with it" during the first half hour, you might as well take your popcorn and run.

Jackie (Karen Sillas) is an "executive assistant" (she does not accept "secretary") at a New York law firm who has invited a paralegal, Michael (Noonan), to her place. She doesn't know him well but they've had a few laughs in the office, and they share a vigorous distaste for the pompous lawyers in their firm. Now the protective office setting is gone and they are on their own for an evening of fencing. They parry and thrust around, missing with lame jokes, trying to find a topic in common...Michael waxes about microwaves, while Jackie's exposure to science is limited to nature specials on TV. She is talking past him as he delivers non-sequiturs.

By dinner time, the two have shared confessions: Michael, known as "Mr. Strange" in the office, discloses that he is working on a book, "The Burden of Justice," which will expose the corruption of the lawyers in their firm. Jackie is impressed and hesitatingly admits she has written something, too--a children's story called "What Happened Was..." These two works in progress provide the two revelations of the evening, especially the latter. Jackie's "children's story" features murder, incest and a topless dancer named Mini-Minnie. She's had it published by a vanity press. By evening's end, the two have groped a bit, exposed their psyches a bit, and stumbled into a misunderstanding. Jackie feels humiliated and just as alone. Michael is shamed and just as solitary; he stammers near the end that he wants "someone to tell me what to do." As he leaves, there is word of getting together again. It doesn't seem likely.

What Happened Was... is the sum of its quirky script and its two performers. Sillas's Jackie is over 30, plumpish, just this side of pretty, and a lonely creature who has never had anyone visit her apartment in her five years there. Yet she possesses an element of abandon, as when she lets her hair down and languishes on her couch (also her bed), sending come-hither signals her dense date just doesn't receive. Sillas (later the star of the CBS TV cop show "Under Suspicion") really lets it rip when she narrates her grim fairy tale, her face in passionate earnest as the camera stays on it in tight close-up, and the viewer wonders where she dredged up this parody of Stephen King. Jackie runs back and forth on the line between forlorn and feisty, and Sillas's

performance makes her fully believable. She kept me watching and hoping for her.

Tom Noonan himself is gangly and balding, apparently intelligent yet eccentric, with bits of both the drone and the hermit about him. He himself admits that “my face doesn’t have much to do with what I’m feeling.” He doesn’t aim for--and doesn’t get--your sympathy; he’s too hard to read and you quite can’t trust what he is saying. His skull-like countenance and his smarmy grin bespeak a menace which never quite arrives (although he has played nasties in films like *Manhunter* and *The Last Action Hero*). It’s a most self-effacing role Noonan has given himself and one with a degree of idiosyncrasy rare in American movies. He carries it off admirably, never quite revealing the prime secrets of Michael’s whimsical nature.

The play/movie is in the grain of certain contemporary American character drama, with hints of early Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and even John Guare, as unlikely characters come together, initially for laughs, then mixed with pity, and usually ending in a baring of souls in a stunning, revelatory--sometimes violent--scene. The revelation in Noonan’s piece is not violent, other than what it does to the character’s emotions. He treats his characters honestly, without condescension but with fairness.

What Happened Was... is a tight little movie about a date. It can hardly be recommended, however, as a “date movie.” The closest thing to a car crash it offers is the clash of too bruised egos. What it does offer is the rewarding turns of two actors whose characters you feel you know pretty well when the date is over.

(“What Happened Was... is not rated, but contains no violence or overtly sexy situations, and only two or three cuss words.)

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