

Dancer in the Dark

Four years ago, Danish director Lars von Trier broke into Europe's and America's film consciousness with *Breaking the Waves*, a striking--if unlikable--film which critics loved but which left audiences befuddled. It was a grand prize winner at the Cannes Film Festival and was dominated by a career-making performance by British actress Emily Watson. This past May, von Trier won a second Palme d'Or at Cannes with his new film *Dancer in the Dark*.

There are some clear--and, to this reviewer--unsettling parallels between this new film and *Breaking the Waves*. Again, the film revolves around an exceedingly naive, even childlike young woman, stuck in a rigid life and trending towards an excruciating sacrifice. Again, the film--shot in hand-held digital video by von Trier himself--proceeds in jumpy, discontinuous cuts with a concentration of dense and emotion-laden close-ups.

The story is puzzling: in 1964 in a rural part of Washington state, Czech refugee and single mother Selma (played by Icelandic pop-rocker Bjork) works in a sheet metal plant, but is going blind and knows her son Gene will suffer the same fate. She has saved up for his crucial eye operation, but her supposed friend and landlord Bill (David Morse) turns on her and goes after her cash, leading to a tragic confrontation. There are other head-scratching elements; what is French film diva Catherine Deneuve doing here as a kerchiefed laborer?

If the story and its realization sound odd, add this to the mix: Selma, mooning in her own, musical-inspired dream world, periodically hears rhythms from her daily life, in factory machinery, train rails, prison cells, and bursts into song--just like in the old Hollywood flicks! The feeling is very much like Dennis Potter's canny British television shows "Pennies from Heaven" and "The Singing Detective," but nowhere near as effective.

Bottom line: is this film worth seeing? However weird it is, there is something strangely compelling about it and about Bjork's mesmerizing presence (she was also honored at Cannes). I purposely did not say "performance" because this movie novice does not act so much as **be**. Whether you want to spend time with her is a tough call...

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