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## FILM ROUNDUP

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KEITH UHLICH



*La Flor*

***The Art of Self-Defense*** (Dir. Riley Stearns). Starring: Jesse Eisenberg, Alessandro Nivola, Imogen Poots. It begins like a twee indie, with introvert nine-to-fiver Casey (Jesse Eisenberg) shambling through a life most ordinary in Louisville, Kentucky. Even the dog food he purchases is generically branded “dog food.” Then he’s beaten up by a roving gang of motorcyclists, a catalyst to check out the local karate dojo run by uber-macho Sensei (Alessandro Nivola, brilliant), who wants to help Casey unleash the virile beast within. There’s more to Sensei’s plan than he’s revealing, of course, and it may involve the dojo’s only female, Anna (Imogen Poots), to whom Casey takes a fancy. Writer-director Riley Stearns has concocted a very of-the-moment satire of incel culture—*Fight Club* as helmed by Wes Anderson. The filmmaker’s own strange voice is evident, too (this is his second feature). He has an especially sure hand with the deadpan stylings of his performers. The finale, how-

ever, leans a tad too much toward hope and redemption, blunting some of the edge. [R] ★★★1/2

***La Flor*** (Dir. Mariano Llinás). Starring: Elisa Carricajo, Valeria Correa, Pilar Gamboa, Laura Paredes. It’s likely many viewers will be put off by the running time of Argentinean writer-director Mariano Llinás’s near-fourteen-hour feature, which is designed to be screened across several days. Yet the overarching sense of playfulness—evident from frame one in which Llinás himself (no joke) telepathically explains the film’s conceit—should break down any resistance. *La Flor* is composed of six stories, four with beginnings and no ends, one “complete,” and one with a middle and end and no beginning. Almost all of the tales star the same four actresses (Elisa Carricajo, Valeria Correa, Pilar Gamboa and Laura Paredes) in different roles, and are a mix of genres from mummy movie to musical to spy thriller to pseudo-documen-

tary to a remake of a famously incomplete French film classic by Jean Renoir. Llinás describes *La Flor* as a love letter to his very game and appealing performers, and it certainly is that. It’s also a mischievous treatise on the ways we yoke the world, through storytelling, into idealized forms that can’t help but collapse when butting up against life’s complexities. [N/R] ★★★★★

***Midsommar*** (Dir. Ari Aster). Starring: Florence Pugh, Jack Reynor, Vilhelm Blomgren. The latest from writer-director Ari Aster (*Hereditary*) is beautifully made, gynophobic garbage. Dani (Florence Pugh) is the tragedy-prone girlfriend of a grad student (Jack Reynor) about to head overseas with his best buds to attend a ceremonial Scandinavian celebration. Dani tags along, much to the group’s barely-disguised cha-

plea Mel has heard too many times and dismisses. Then he's visited by a couple that throws his sealed-off world—we never see him outside the shop—into tumult.

Shelton uses exterior shots of Birmingham as a reminder that the old ways still exist, including Rebel nostalgia. Cynthia (Jillian Bell) has inherited a Civil War sword from her grandfather boasting a provenance not found in history books: the sword proves the South won the Civil War. Nothing in her grandfather's letter or in the documentation makes sense, but Cynthia and her partner Mary (Michaela Watkins) decide to sell the sword with the preposterous backstory to Mel. He doesn't buy it, but Nathan knows there's a market. After showing an online video featuring a request for the item that walked out the door, Mel sees an opportunity: "Let's take these fuckers for everything they've got."

An unusual business arrangement begins. Cynthia and Mary get invited into the sale, whose representative on the other side is an alternately humble and menacing redneck named Hog Jaws (played with relish by veteran character actor Toby Huss). The deal goes all over the place, including the back of a padded van where the quartet of sellers travels to a secret destination.

When the pace slows, *Sword of Trust* excels. Maron deserves the credit. In one scene, he talks about his path to owning a pawn shop, delivering the monologue so directly and with the slightest hint of regret that you're riveted. After a lifetime of putting up walls to protect himself, he's letting himself be vulnerable. It's an honest, lovely scene in a movie that needs more of them and less of Nathaniel's proselytizing.

Maron's poignant performance imbues *Sword of Trust* with a sweet, bedraggled authenticity, one that doesn't stick around long enough. The movie's MO is people outfoxing each other—a more benign version of David Mamet's character noir—a maneuver that exposes Shelton's tentativeness in steering an action-packed (for her) plot. The scheming doesn't feel like chess moves but improvisational bailouts, "yes and" taken to the point of exhaustion. By the third act, it seems that Shelton doesn't know where to move the story, so she relies on comedic misunderstandings or mumblecore *deus ex machina*. It's an awkward stretch for a director who thrives in exploring people seeking clarity in uncomfortable situations.

The four unlikely protagonists swapping their origin stories in the back of that wobbly van provides a bittersweet truce in Shelton's battle to shoehorn irreverent goofiness into a somber character sketch. Plenty of scenes had me smiling: Mel's begrudging tolerance of slow-witted, sweet Nathaniel; Mary's ferocious negotiating with Mel; any scene featuring Huss, who is a national treasure; Mel rebuffing Deirdre, who begs for redemption from a man (almost) out of compassion.

Whenever Maron appears, *Sword of Trust* reaches a quiet depth that feels right and fills us with longing: Shelton chose the wrong adventure. In focusing on a frenetic bungled con comedy, the characters aren't the only ones who get outsmarted. [R] ■

grin. Once in the land of the almost-never-setting-sun, the weirdness begins, first in the form of hallucinogens that brings Dani's fears and painful past to the fore, and later in increasingly bizarre and violent rituals that perversely prove cathartic. Aster said he



wrote the film in the aftermath of a bad breakup, and *Midsommar* seems, in part, an attempt by a man to give a woman he once wronged the benefit of the doubt. How it plays in execution, however, is as a sociopath's revenge fantasy, with the overseas window dressing standing in metaphorically for Dani's own castrating desires. (The repellent lesson: "Bitches be crazy, boys!") It doesn't help that Aster's influences are so imitatively evident—*The Wicker Man*, Bergman psychodramas (two characters are even named Ingmar and Pelle)—and his touch so resoundingly humorless. Somewhere inside this mess is a Ken Russell movie begging to burst out. [R] ★1/2

*Too Old to Die Young* (Dir. Nicolas Winding Refn). Starring: Miles Teller, Augusto Aguilera, Nell Tiger Free. Shamelessly puerile Danish writer-director Nicolas Winding Refn (*The Neon Demon*) indulges every impulse in his ten-part, Amazon-financed... movie? TV series? Streaming something-or-other? Whatever it is, it's certainly a compelling dive into the darkness of this given moment in time. Alternating between the tales of a corrupt cop (Miles Teller, treated appropriately like a prop) and an on-the-rise Hispanic drug lord (Augusto Aguilera, oozing charisma), *Too Old to Die Young* wallows in neon-drenched violence and toxically masculine perversity, though with an eventual turn toward the feminine ideal, and all of it leavened by an abundance of dark, deadpan humor. (The downtempo line readings alone are a fount for endless hilarity.) Cinematographers Darius Khondji and Diego Garcia do stunning work throughout, as does composer Cliff Martinez, reuniting with Refn for some more deliciously maximalist underscoring. There are also terrific supporting turns from Jena Malone, Babs Olusanmokin, and John Hawkes, along with some uproarious character work by James Urbaniak as one of a pair of pornography-producing brothers. The film/series/streamer also fits nicely into the Euro-artist-commenting-on-the-sick-soul-of-America genre of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*, which Refn alludes to quite explicitly near story's end, is the exemplar. [N/R] ★★★★★1/2 ■

*Cold Case Hammarskjöld* (Dir. Mads Brügger. Starring Mads Brügger, Göran Björkdahl.) In 1961, the United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld died in a mysterious plane crash in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), Africa. Did the plane crash due to pilot error, equipment failure, or something more nefarious? Assassination theories began circulating immediately, but the investigation dead-ended and, conveniently, nobody ever was charged. Hammarskjöld, a Swedish economist, persistently advocated for the independence of colonial nations controlled by Western countries, whose primary interest was mining the vast resources of rich minerals. Hammarskjöld wanted to free the countries and give them control over their mineral wealth, so he had enemies in extremely high places. During his six years of investigation, Brügger reinterviewed African witnesses who white authorities in 1961 would never consider, a NSA officer with first-hand evidence, and he recovered damning documents from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the end, he convincingly proves that foreign governments conspired to assassinate Hammarskjöld. But that assertion is not the final bell. The ringer is even more astounding. An overlooked report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission describes a white supremacy mercenary organization intent on weaponizing AIDS to create Black genocide in South Africa. Their evil intentions were terrifyingly clear. Whether they were successful is plausible, though probably not provable, but still a soul-shaking example of the evil possible by the human species. [NR] ★★★★★

*Life and Nothing More* (Dir. Antonio Méndez Esparza. Starring Regina Williams, Andrew Bleechington, Robert Williams.) This empathetic, slice-of-life family drama follows the aching, day-to-day struggles of a single, black mother raising a 14-year-old son and three-year-old daughter. Regina (Williams) works long hours as a minimum-wage waitress in a diner, then stumbles home to cook and clean and care for her children. No wonder she yells at Andrew (Bleechington), and no wonder he is withdrawn and surly. With tough love, and angry love, Regina tries to keep him from following in the steps of his imprisoned father, and Andrew tries to figure out how to transition from a black teen into an adult in a society that fears and marginalizes black men. Through the nuances of moment-by-moment events and interactions, of conversations that raise a glimmer of a smile or a teardrop, we follow along as though we are part of the family. We experience the accumulating effects of the happiness and the heartbreak, the laughing and the brooding, the anger and the love, until we understand each person's feelings and their resulting actions, instead of judging from a stranger's viewpoint. Director Esparza coaxes incredibly authentic performances from the cast of untrained actors, and uses a script often worked out by the actors scene by scene. He shows us that life itself really is much more than a series of daily events. [NR] ★★★★★ ■