

'Jesus' Son' explores differences between living, dead

BY SAMUEL MCKEON

FH, the main character of "Jesus' Son," is invariably someone we've met and most certainly the guy we aspire least to be — the drifter, the ne'er do well sucker, the junkie who slips in and out of Holiday Inns and perpetually dons a scummy blue coat.

The "FH," so to speak, which is how he got the name. What a surprise that in this film a guy like that is the redeemer.

Like FH, "Jesus' Son," adapted from the short stories of Denis Johnson and playing at the Mary Riempa Ross Theater this weekend, is tricky to get a grip on.

Directed by Alison Maclean, it seems constantly hazy and indistinct, content to let the mundane, the peculiar events that litter short fiction draw out absurd.

Also like short fiction, the scenes have a comfy and loose connection to the one directly before it, which adds up to little more than witnessing a slice of life lived, with a revelation revealing itself over time.

The movie is doused in death, and yet it doesn't seem so. We, like FH, allow those experiences to pass in favor of whatever odd trial ensues.

It takes a certain style of filmmaking, and the certain right lead performance to make this work. Maclean delivers, as does Billy Crudup as FH, a dense guy, but not stupid, nor the type of dense that reveals itself to be a cruel bully.

"Jesus' Son" is partially about exploring those differences — or if there is one in the first place —

between the living and the dead, those with hope and those hoped for.

It is also about heroin addiction in the opening hour. FH, a 20-something drifter in the college town of Iowa City, meets up with dope head Michelle (Samantha Morton) as they begin an off-and-on relationship.

It's not stormy as much as damaged goods from the start, as Michelle draws FH into drugs, and FH often lets her down or abandons her emotions all together. Michelle runs, but is brought back by the drugs.

One such reunion comes just in time, which Maclean shoots in split screen showing FH and cowboy drug buddy Wayne (Denis Leary) overdosing to the same bad heroin in different apartments.

Surrounding that story is a flood of vignettes, including Wayne's story of stripping his own home of copper wire for dope money, that pads the central relationship.

Most intriguing is FH's short-term job in a small-town Iowa emergency room with a junkie thief of an orderly (Jack Black) and an accident with a hunting knife.

How this scene is established, and how it concludes, typifies the distant charm of "Jesus' Son." That mood hangs through nearly every frame, and Crudup, who reacts to life events as if they made scrambled eggs of his brains, fits the bemused tone of the picture.

And considering the issues at hand — life, death, drugs, salvation — a heavier treatment certainly could have been in order.

Later this year, a similar film with a polar opposite tone, Darren Aronofsky's "Requiem For a

MOVIE REVIEW

Jesus' Son

Director: Alison Maclean

Stars: Billy Crudup, Samantha Morton & Jack Black

Rating: R (language, drug use, death, nudity)

★★★★ of 4 stars



Courtesy photo
Billy Crudup stars as FH in the movie "Jesus' Son." The film follows FH's journey from Iowa City, Iowa, to Phoenix, Ariz.

Dream," will garner an NC-17 rating for its disturbing montage of the dehumanizing nature of drugs.

"Jesus' Son" makes the same case, but with the much quieter, specific strokes that match Johnson's writing style. Hints are dropped about the real nature of FH. But outside two sequences, toward the end, Maclean wisely restrains, opting to gear down the camera tricks in a favorable, pretty, honest view at Midwestern life.

A frequent but inaccurate criticism of the film is its draggy nature, especially toward the end, when FH ventures to Phoenix after getting clean to work in an asylum.

But the concluding sequences are necessary to show a more important recovery than sobering up. It poses the intriguing question of whether the healer can heal without having the same done to them.

It is the only question "Jesus' Son" seems to definitively answer, and despite all the blur that has to come before it, the journey still seems proper and satisfying, like a life lived. That's more than can be said for most movies.

Bjork album explores new venue

BY ANDREW SHAW

Iceland's renaissance woman, Bjork, continues to break ranks and poke her nose into new venues of creative exploration.

"Selmasongs," a seven track sampling of the music from "Dancer in the Dark," shows yet one more incarnation of the artist.

The soundtrack for "Dancer in the Dark," a film directed by Lars von Trier and featured at the Cannes Film Festival and the New York Film Festival, was composed and performed by Bjork, who also played the starring role in the film.

Since her departure from the Sugarcubes, Bjork Gudmundsdottir, thankfully widely known by her first name, has become the reigning queen of psychedelic, cerebral, ambient and completely original techno music. Her voice is unmatched by any other artist heard in the Americas, exhibiting the rich accent and raw beauty of her homeland.

Bjork's previous solo albums feature her mystifying talents at mixing everyday sounds with intricate techno conflagrations into eccentric masterpieces. Her albums all fit together under the personal genre she has created and perfected, but "Selmasongs" is the first time that all of the songs follow a theme and common idea.

"Dancer in the Dark" is the story of Selma, a Czech immigrant with a hereditary disorder which is slowly robbing her of her vision. She works in a factory, hoping to raise enough money while she is still able-bodied to buy her son an operation to cure him of the disease.

"Selmasongs" plays on the idea of the heightening of the sense of hearing as one loses their sense of sight. "Cvalda" starts with the repetitious mechanic sounds of a factory soon

mixed with Bjork's erratic voice dancing around a full orchestra and a seemingly infinite number of techno layers until her voice overpowers the prisons of her job and her affliction.

The album as a complete work is handled perfectly in all aspects. The first track, "Overture," is a gently commanding and electrifying piece untouched by technological advancements. Featuring a warm brass ensemble, "Overture" sets up the musical theme for the rest of the album.

"Selmasongs" ends with "New World," a vocal composition strongly based upon the theme from "Overture." Bjork's voice takes the place of the French horn on the latter track, matching the beauty of the brass instrument with her virtuosic singing.

Traces of techno beats invade "New World," giving the song an important transformation from the original tune, proving to the listener that Selma's character has undergone a change, yet still revels in the beauty of her past.

Having spent so much time concentrating on producing the breath-taking music for "Dancer in the Dark," one would think that her performance in the movie itself would suffer.

But Bjork isn't simply the foreign Madonna. Bjork won the award for Best Female Performance at Cannes, an honor that indicates her expertise as an all-around artist, and dispels



MUSIC REVIEW

Björk

Title: "Selmasongs"

Label: 2000 Electra Records

★★★★ of 4 stars

rumors of her being a thinly-spread performer.

Bjork is already in the process of working on her album slated for release in 2001. With the maturity shown in the album "Selmasongs" and the film "Dancer in the Dark," Bjork's creative explorations will only continue to grow.

New Green Day album shows band's maturity

The rockers once again find a new form of musical expression with their new release 'Warning.'

BY ANDREW SHAW

The headlines should read "Hell Freezes Over, Green Day Grows Up."

Album after album, Green Day has released the same sound: Billy Joe's whining vocals, electric guitars playing the same three chords repeatedly and drums hammering out a basic punk rock beat. With "Warning," that template hasn't completely changed, but it has finally mutated into something noteworthy.

Green Day's last release, 1997's "Nimrod," won the three-piece band praise for the introspective single "Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)," and deservedly so. The song, buried near the end of the 18-track album, was the first sign that the aging rockers were growing up, mellowing out and finding new forms of musical expression.

In "Warning," Green Day follows the advice of their newly-won fans and produces a sound that shows the band's maturity, while still retaining their personal sound.

From the title track, it is easy to recognize the differences of the new and improved Green Day. The guitar riff, though still simplistic and somewhat redundant, is played on acoustic guitar.

The vocal layering, simple melody, exciting harmony and raw spirit of Green Day's previous music is still in tact; however, the addition of the acoustic instrumentation changes the feel just enough to tell the listener there is something special wrapped up in "Warning."

"Hold On" opens with a raw harmonica sound played over a rhythmic acoustic guitar, which is reminiscent of the Beatles'

MUSIC REVIEW

Green Day

Title: "Warning"

Label: 2000 Reprise Records

★★★★ of 4 stars

"Love Me Do."

"Hold On" takes a folk-infused feel, with a light but punching aura still possessing elements of punk influence.

Though it may be the gut reaction of those with a distaste for Green Day to say they sold out, "Warning" shows the band is far from it.

It would be easy for the band to try to reproduce the popularity of "Good Riddance" with another slow, stripped-down ballad, but "Warning" doesn't have any definitive ballads.

Green Day has found a way to capture the full-grown sound of the best tracks from "Nimrod," but has also found a way to keep the sound they have had since the early '90s.

It is unfortunate that it took this long for Green Day to produce "Warning," but the effects of the album will hopefully be commercial success. At this point in musical history, a time when the industry has moved away from the rock acts of the "grunge era," it will be easy for a great rock incarnation like Green Day's to slip by the consumers.

The band has supported us through the teenage years and now shows promise to inspire us for years to come. To disregard this "Warning" would be a musical tragedy.

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