

# Audience suffers more than 'Valentine's' victims

BY BILLY SMUCK

I don't know what Cupid was aiming to accomplish in the latest holiday horror flick "Valentine," but whatever it was, he certainly missed his mark.

Unless of course director Jamie Blank's objective was to get audience members to forfeit \$7 for a movie they don't stick around long enough to finish watching.

This thought occurred to me as I watched people leave to go to the bathroom, never to return. I left as well, though I didn't have to go. I just wanted to get out of there, but I did return in order to give the film a fair review.

"Valentine" adopts a worn-down, burned-out horror blueprint similar to "Halloween" with subtle changes like a different holiday and an increased body count, leaving nothing for the sake of suspense.

That's because the killer is identified in the first five minutes. At a sixth grade Valentine's Day dance, a young nerd named

## Valentine

Jeremy Melton is ridiculed by the girls he asked to dance.

He is later beaten up by some of his fellow classmates, stripped down and doused with Kool-Aid in front of everybody, a humiliation he has not since forgotten. Kids can be so mean.

We learn later that Melton was sent to reform school, then juvenile hall and finally a mental hospital, tormented by rejection and humiliation. (Poor kid, his entire life is identified by a sixth grade dance.)

Fast forward 13 years, and these same five girls start receiving Valentine cards with cute little poems saying "Roses are red, violets are blue. They'll need dental records to identify you," signed JM.

Trying not to make the killer's identity completely obvious, another character, Jason McAllister, is later introduced as a killer suspect.

After fair warning, JM dresses up in his black trench coat

and cupid mask (scary), killing his victims with various selections from his collection of tools and weapons. Kind of makes the young ladies out there think twice about saying no when someone asks them to dance.

I guess he's still upset at these five yuppie, self-righteous bimbos, thereby creating a sympathy factor for Jeremy.

Kate (Marley Shelton) is the exception. She was the most likable while her recovering alcoholic boyfriend Adam attempted to be, but couldn't even convince his girlfriend that he had good intentions.

Adam, played by David Boreanaz (star of TV's "Angel") is later suspected to be the killer. There's even a bit of a joke thrown in there when Kate says, "OK, he's not an angel, but he's not a murderer."

That along with some limp sexual humor didn't make the movie any more attractive or engaging. Even with the hot female cast, there wasn't even any complimentary sexual content to salvage this sunken film.

"Valentine" was really more laughable than scary. Whenever someone is killed, no one seems to notice or care. Um ... weren't there more characters at the beginning of this movie?

Back when horror flicks attempted to keep audiences on the edge of their seats and gasping in fright, "Valentine" makes no attempt at doing that, instead focusing solely on dead bodies. The more the better. In fact, the killing spree gets so out of hand that, I can't say for sure, but I believe some characters are killed twice in this film.

In the end, filmmakers attempted to be clever by creating an element of surprise that really made no sense and fool-



Courtesy Photo

ishly makes the movie worse than it already is.

It's sad that some movies are made only to draw in an audience and not deliver the goods. "Valentine" is a prime example of that kind of low-grade, poorly constructed movie merely for cheap thrills. Even Starship's prices aren't cheap enough. I can't even recommend this

"Valentine" for people I don't like.

Starring David Boreanaz, Denise Richards, Marley Shelton, Jessica Capshaw and Jessica Cauffiel. Running Time 99 minutes, rated R for strong horror violence, some sexuality and language. Showing at the Plaza 4.

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# 'Chocolat' is charming as a guilty pleasure

Juliette Binoche brightens up a town by tempting its people with sweet concoctions.

BY CHRIS JACOBS

La tranquillité. Tranquillity. Sometimes it's hard to find when you're the oddball of the community. Sometimes you need a tangible element to free you from society's institutions. Sometimes everyone needs a little chocolate.

Swedish director Lasse Hallström's new film "Chocolat" presents the story of a young mother (Juliette Binoche) whose desire to bring freedom, in the form of the individual and community, infiltrates a small French town constituted by the words of politicians and the "Word of God" preached by the clergy.

When the young mother, Vianne, establishes a chocolate shop during Lent, the citizens don't know how to react to the shop's enticing element of pleasure. The local church has condemned the new business because of Vianne's rejection of the Catholic Church.

But slowly the rejects of society and those who can't resist

## Chocolat

their "desires" come crawling out of the woodwork, curious of the chocolate's potential of changing their lives.

Her chocolate is portrayed as the bearer of freedom and the regeneration of lost time.

Vianne's landlord, played by Judy Dench ("Shakespeare in Love" and "The World is Not Enough"), turns to Vianne to revitalize her life despite her diminishing health due to diabetes. She has been distanced from her daughter and grandchild because of her refusal to receive care at an elderly hospital that she terms the "mortality."

Vianne brightens her outlook with a special chocolate concoction and unites her with her grandson, who is constantly looking to distance himself from his mother's, or basically the Catholic Church's, stern and discriminating guidelines of the time, 1959.

Vianne and her all-healing chocolates spare the life of an abused woman (Lena Olin), whose husband has absolutely no restraint over his irrational actions. She brings families together and rejuvenates the lost

sex lives of married couples. In fact, Vianne's chocolates save just about everyone but herself.

In the beginning of the film, Binoche's character is unable to bring peace to her own life. She runs from town to town and fights against injustice but always folds when the time comes to truly put her cards on the table.

This leads to the weakest element of the film, a romance between Vianne and Roux (Johnny Depp).

The relationship develops when Roux, a riverboat wanderer, joins forces with Vianne to fight against the established beliefs of the past and rejoice in the nondestructive elements of the present, like chocolate, music and celebration.

But the movie becomes a little sappy when Depp's character becomes emotionally and physically involved with Vianne. His role, however, adds to Vianne's crusade against the image of her chocolate, decency and pleasure.

Roux, along with the rest of Vianne's friends, shows her that the true meaning of life is settling down and enjoying what stands before her.

Roux represents the perfect image of a man who supports the

liberation of others, but he also shows Vianne that the fight for freedom must end somewhere when acceptance is finally achieved. Everyone must eventually settle down.

Vianne's enemy, the fighter for established traditions and inequality, is personified by the Comte de Reynaud (Alfred Molina). As mayor, he influences the town and the church to peacefully revolt against Vianne's business, hoping to eventually drive her and her "foreign" beliefs out of the town.

The Comte de Reynaud's role in the film represents the problem created when a person uses power to influence individual decisions. With absolute power in the church, Molina's character convinces the town that the pleasure created by chocolate is evil, and his words effectively coerce them.

The Comte de Reynaud is the classic example of a man who abuses his power. But he is pure, following all of the Church's rituals without giving in to his own desires, and therefore innocent. His exclusive actions warn the audience that if not careful, even the most dedicated man can be guilty of injustice when following long-established traditions. One must always examine the traditions he or she follows; then dedication to these traditions is necessary to maintain a good society.

The moral of the story has been presented in millions of films: Don't judge others until you've given them a real chance. But "Chocolat" offers the theme in a fresh, intelligent light and forces its audience to rediscover the traditions it follows.

Starring Juliette Binoche, Judy Dench, Johnny Depp, Lena Olin and Alfred Molina. Rated PG-13 for adult language and situations. Showing at the Plaza 4.

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