



Mad Love

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Director: Antonia Bird

Antonia Bird's first American film, hot on the heels of *Priest*, turns out to be something of a road movie, as Casey (the eternally pouting Drew Barrymore) tempts blue-eyed, naive Matt (Chris O'Donnell, sans Robin drag) into joy-riding from Seattle to New Mexico. Comparisons with Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* are unavoidable.

There were worrying signposts early on — a meandering credits sequence in which Barrymore frolics on the lake, kitchen scenes with the sort of precocious children WC Fields would have slaughtered on sight — and it's not till halfway through the film that the precarious state of Casey's mental stability is revealed. One of the problems with *Mad Love* is that, with the lack of strong characters 'in the wings' (the relationship between Casey and her parents is particularly sketchy), it's Barrymore and O'Donnell who have to sustain the film.

There's one gripping sequence in which *Mad Love* catches fire. The couple have stopped in a small New Mexico town and O'Donnell goes into a shop to buy Barrymore a dress. Suddenly, with subtly shifting sounds and snatches of images, Bird unsettles us with a sense of unease; perhaps even a hint that Casey's current problems are the result of unresolved issues between father and daughter dating back to her childhood. If Paula Milne's script had provided a stronger motivation for Casey's behaviour and problems (incest is one of the central themes in Bird's *Priest*), *Mad Love* could have been a much tougher film.

Otherwise, this movie seems a catalogue of lost opportunities. Even as the final credits run, and Kirsty MacColl sings Billy Bragg's 'As Long as You Hold Me', I couldn't help but think Bragg himself would have given the song the abrasive touch the film needs.

WILLIAM DART

## Under Siege 2

Director: Geoff Murphy

Bons mots fall fast and thick in Geoff Murphy's latest epic: "Chance favours the prepared mind," "Technology can be used for beauty or debasement, and until you plug it in, you just can't tell," or (my favourite) "Assumption is the mother of all fuck-ups."

The setting is not a Neil Simon penthouse, or

a Pinter drawing-room, but an Amtrak train speeding towards Denver. Steven Seagal is on it, vacationing with his niece. As chance would have it, this is the very train picked by a band of scoundrels to launch their Doomsday attack. Yet again, Seagal proves that he, almost single-handedly, can save the world.

A formula piece of film-making *Under Siege 2* may be, but it's immensely enjoyable and mercifully unburdened by any pretensions. Murphy's expertise in this genre shows and Seagal himself is an extraordinary phenomenon. Sans ponytail this time round, his Casey Ryback is the ultimate in cool, with a strange breathy style of delivery that would serve him well as a cabaret singer (and perhaps this is a career he could branch out into, as the actor co-wrote the title song). And he's not just got a sexy voice — he can dispatch villains with the speed and efficiency of a registered chiropractor.

And what villains! The noted playwright and actor Eric Bogosian (last seen in Oliver Stone's *Talk Radio*) is the wacko scientist behind the scheme, with Everett McGill as Penn, his right-hand honcho-psycho, so tough he clears his sinuses with pepper spray.

WILLIAM DART

## Killing Zoe

Director: Roger Avary

The selling point of this film is undoubtedly Quentin Tarantino, who is credited as executive producer, and Avary was one of the scripters on Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* and *True Romance*. *Killing Zoe* certainly flourishes all the Tarantino trademarks — dizzying speed, throwaway violence, cynical banter — but *Reservoir Dogs* or *Pulp Fiction* isn't.

Zoe opens flatly. The camera races through the streets of Paris in the opening titles ('Haven't we seen this before with Glasgow in *Shallow Grave*?,' I thought), and when Zed (Eric Stoltz) and Zoe (Julie Delpy) make love, there's much intercutting between the bedroom activities and Murnau's *Nosferatu*. The couple chat about life, love and water sports, both pre- and post-coitus, although it must be admitted that Delpy had a wittier sparring partner with Ethan Hawke in *Before Sunrise*.

Zed's friend Eric (Jean-Hugues Anglade, playing it to the hilt) bursts into the room, evicts Delpy with a minimum of dignity, and suggests that "in Paris it's good to smell like you've been fucking". At last, you might think, we're down to tin tacks. But there's still a high speed

dash through the Parisian streets, and a particularly drawn out drug-fest, complete with ramblings about Dixieland and Viking movies, before the film comes to its point.

The bank heist occupies a good half of the movie, and is brilliantly handled. Classic stuff this, with the gang members going progressively batty and/or ratting on each other. At last there's a chance to pull out some of the *coups de violence* that Tarantino fanatics expect (a brash American tourist receives what many may well perceive as a just reward).

The final showdown between Eric and Zed has fists and walls taking the place of automatic weapons and flick-knives. This is breath-takingly handled — Anglade's final reckoning must go down as one of the great cinematic deaths in a tradition started by Arthur Penn in *Bonnie and Clyde*.

WILLIAM DART

## Ermo

Director: Zhou Xiaowen

With all the publicity Undayan Prasad and his *Bandit Queen* received through that film being banned in India, one should spare a thought for the Chinese director, Zhou Xiaowen, whose first and crucial first feature, *In Their Prime* (1986), still remains substantially unseen on the international circuit.

Xiaowen's latest film tells about grinding poverty and the thin line between hope and despair in a small Chinese village and, by implication, in China itself. Ermo (the radiant Mongolian actor Ailiya) has a life dominated by the making and selling of noodles. Trapped in a loveless marriage, her only escape is a brief extra-marital fling with the neighbour, while she endures the constant wrath and sarcasm of his podgy wife. Venturing beyond her village into town, she sees, in a shop window, the object that will give a direction and goal to all her labours — a 29 inch television. Her determination to acquire this icon of modern civilisation takes up most of the film.

*Ermo* is not *Tampopo* Chinese style. Alongside it, the Japanese film is a light-hearted frolic, but there is some humour amongst Ermo's grimness. Much of it is broad and barely survives the subtitles (what does is richly scatological); some is purely visual (a group of impassive Chinese faces glued to a European soap opera, or the resourceful Ermo using her noodle strainer to provide a television aerial).

*Ermo* is also an intensely beautiful film. Some of the beauty lies in its exoticism, such

as the barren terrain between village and town, or the tantalising glimpse of a festival parade. Elsewhere, like a true documentarist, the director finds a strange beauty in the commonplace: an evening meal brewing on the stove, or Ermo pounding the noodle dough with her feet. The spirit of Bresson breathes in these images.

WILLIAM DART

## Tommy Boy

Director: Peter Segal

*Tommy Boy* — with its 350 pound, D plus graduate hero (the terminally cute Chris Farley) — might seem like the latest entrant in a drongo genre, last celebrated in *Dumb and Dumber*. But *Tommy Boy* is much more coherent than *Dumb and Dumber*, which was a shaggy dog tale, launched from Jim Carrey's sexual obsessions and inadequacies. We're not just rescuing kidnapping Aspen yuppies this time round, we're talking about the lives and livelihoods of 300 factory workers. This is a blue-collar fairytale for the 90s, with a humanist thrust that would have had Frank Capra beaming his approval.

*Dumb and Dumber* had some great moments, if you were not immune to the spastic facial contortions of Jim Carrey and Jeff Daniels playing as Dépardieu on Prozac. But more sparks fly with Farley and David Spade, contrasting the one's chubby amiability with the other's prissy nerdiness. There are near hysterical scenes; the funniest involving a sing-along with Karen Carpenter on the road, and an encounter with a bimbo airport agent that will bring screams of recognition from many hapless travellers.

Brian Dennehy does a star turn as Farley's Dad (his duet with Farley on Ray Charles' 'What'd I Say' proves to be a killer in every sense of the word). On the side of villainy are Bo Derek, looking cruelly ravaged in her first scene (a poolside spoof on *10*, the film that made her name), and a seedy Rob Lowe, who learns the peril of taking a whizz on an electric fence.

Chris Farley and David Spade, like Billy Crystal, Eddie Murphy and a score of other American funny men, are graduates of *Saturday Night Live*. Their partnership in *Tommy Boy* would suggest they have the potential to become a Laurel and Hardy for our troubled times.

WILLIAM DART