Dennis Hopper's

Out of the Blue

Movie fever is a remarkable phenomenon. By the time the World Film Festival swung into its home stretch, you could swear people were lining up downtown to watch traffic lights change. This, no doubt, played a part in the box office success accorded Out of the Blue, paired with Dennis Hopper's accreditation as director and the picture's 'Canadian' label on the Festival schedule. And last, in turn, was enough to jar a few memories; three years ago, a production shuffle, nearly smothered the film's chances for Canadian certification altogether. That wasn't a central issue in Montreal, though, because people were ''buying blind' at the wicket snapping up handfuls of tickets in the fervent belief that at least one in the bunch could land you a good movie. They didn't luck out on this one.

Out of the Blue has a pretty grim story to tell and spins it out with particular attention to texture and detail. But as a portrait of the social underclass, it's missing some parts. The picture wants us to feel the dirt under its nails, but it has passed up any attempt at new insight for an ultra-heavy dose of sleaze and hard edges. Despite the collection of genuinely solid performances at its core, that central, 'conceptual problem short-circuits the whole movie.

The extraordinary Linda Manz (Days of Heaven, The Wanderers) plays Cebe, a streetwise baby punk with some significant problems. Her mother (Sharon Farrell) is a soft-brained junkie, and her apparently alcoholic father (Hopper) has just finished a jail term for manslaughter; four years before, he steered his semi-trailer right through the centre of a packed school bus. Cebe's a two-fisted baby greaseer on the outside but her mother's made her wear a sweetie suit and costume all conspire to hide the love-starved little girl within — when the defenses are down, she curls up with her teddy bear and sucks her thumb.

It's Hopper's point that is the problem here. Is Out of the Blue trying to re-examine the awkward truism that anyone can have kids? It does that, but without enough discovery: you've seen the point made with more conviction elsewhere. As a profile of the underclass, it farm's no better; because the neon streets and slimy back alleys are almost straight from the 'Easy Rider' catalogue, almost-androgynous face holds the camera with terrific conviction. Cebe may be a victim, but Manz never plays her for pity, and she manages to carry the whole picture.

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