

MOVIE REVIEW

The Winner

'Winner' Places Bet on Satirizing Success

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Three low-rent operators named Frankie, Paulie and Joey (Richard Edson, Saverio Guerra and Frank Whaley) are sittin' around a decrepit desert bus station, contemplating the most recent phenomenon in nearby Las Vegas: a roulette-playing idiot savant who only bets on Sundays and hasn't lost in weeks. How, they ask, can they avail themselves of his good luck?

If only his name weren't Philip, Joey says. If only it were something significant--like, maybe, Jesus. "I need a sign!" he says. And one promptly falls off the bus station wall.

Careening between baggy-pants comedy and film noir parody and shored up by really terrific performances by Rebecca DeMornay and Whaley, Alex Cox's "The Winner" seems to have everything you need--or that Hollywood thinks it needs--for success. There is DeMornay's Louise, the sexy singer-hooker with the heart of gold; a Christ figure/angel manque in the spaced-out Philip (Vincent D'Onofrio); a psychopath, in Philip's brother Johnny (Michael Madsen); broad comedy, from the three aforementioned stooges; a scary man with power (Delroy Lindo's unhappy casino owner); and Billy Bob Thornton in a really bad rug.

Set in Las Vegas, which has become the Monument Valley of postmodern movie America and where the dream of something for nothing can be tarted up like a middle-class tax cut, "The Winner" is a goof. A very stylish goof, but a goof just the same. Its story mines numerous noir cliches, in a way that's almost disarmingly blunt: Louise owes money to the mob. Philip falls in love with her and promises her salvation at the roulette table. Johnny, who arrives in town with their dead father over his shoulders, has a history with Louise (so does everyone else). Kingman (Lindo) and his henchman Jack (Thornton) are plotting. The manic Joey perpetrates a blood bath. The plot line spins off into a vaporous nexus of met expectations, where the only mooring is incongruity.

Where Cox takes his hard left, of course, is in the character of Philip, as unlikely an American as possible: Until he meets Louise, he doesn't care if he wins or loses. Some people might be tempted to say the same about the English-born Cox, who since "Repo Man" and "Sid and Nancy" has been flying well below the radar (the mostly Spanish-language "Highway Patrolman" was quite good, and different, but got limited exposure).

"The Winner" is not an uninteresting film--the Wendy Riss script is smart, Denis Maloney's cinematography is fluid and Cox is a gifted filmmaker. But it is a joke. And to really enjoy it, I'm afraid, you have to want to get the joke.

The Winner, 1997. R, for strong language, along with some violence and sexuality. Mark Damon Productions presents, in association with Village Roadshow-Clipsal Films Partnership, a Ken Schwenker production, released by LIVE Entertainment. Director Alex Cox. Producer Kenneth Schwenker. Executive producers Mark Damon and Rebecca DeMornay. Screenplay by Wendy Riss, based on her play "A Darker Purpose." Cinematographer Denis Maloney. Editor Carlos Puente. Costumes Nancy Steiner. Music Daniel Licht. Production design Cecilia Montiel. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes. Rebecca DeMornay as Louise. Vincent D'Onofrio as Philip. Richard Edson as Frankie. Saverio Guerra as Paulie. Delroy Lindo as Kingman. Michael Madsen as Wolf. Billy Bob Thornton as Jack. Frank Whaley as Joey.

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