

THE WESTSIDER

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'Romper Stomper'/'Orlando'

British Fury and Fantasy

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This summer we're blessed with the usual mega-hits of gargantuan proportion and star power. The dinosaurs and the muscle men, Schwarzen-Stalone have come to get us. Often overlooked amongst all this neon and glitz are a few "smaller" non-Hollywood films that are powerful, artful and fulfilling. Sadly they'll get left in the dust of the over-hype unless sought out. Here are two worthy imports which have all just opened and are playing in

selected venues.

Film

Romper Stomper is an Australian film

as difficult and brutal as *Reservoir Dogs* but without the relieving humor. Writer and director Geoffrey Wright digs deep into the painful and pitiful lives of a band of neo-Nazi skinheads who have taken to beating up recently arrived Vietnamese immigrants. Few of them really have any idea of what the Nazis or Hitler were about; they are mostly in it for the headbanging and drinking themselves into oblivion. The exception is their titular leader, played with convincing horror by Russell Crowe, who was impressive as the conniving lover in last year's Aussie import *Proof*. Crowe's Hando displays a parade-size swastika flag hanging over his bed, but he has read and re-read *Mein Kampf* as chapter and verse. He appears to also harbor homoerotic and possessive tendencies for his number-two man, Davey, played with great depth and haunted soul by Daniel Pollack.

Davey seems to be on the scene for the companionship and a sense of belonging more than for any ideological reason. When Hando picks up a girl in a local pub and begins to mistreat her, it's Davey who almost sweetly comes to her rescue; and it is this relationship with Gabe, played with psychotic gusto by Jacqueline McKenzie, that ultimately gets Hando killed by his friend. What makes this so powerful a film is that the violence, while graphic and care-

fully choreographed, is not gratuitous. The vehemence of the hatred is steeped in an internal evil of loathing which, when examined, is what pulls us into the story and allows us to identify with both victims and perpetrators. The fact that the alienated youth are the children of non-indigenous people attacking newly arrived immigrants has a prescience applicable to an array of problems worthy of exploration. *Romper Stomper* delivers on a number of fronts simultaneously — action, sensitivity, fury and political relevance.

Somewhere else entirely on the scale of things is the witty, vivid, swirling mini-masterpiece *Orlando*, Sally Potter's extravaganza, based on the Virginia Woolf novel. The tale begins in 16th-century England and spans the life of Orlando starting out as a young man who — at the urging of the aging Queen Elizabeth I to "never age, never die" — lives for 400 years, winding up in the 20th century having miraculously changed sex.

The novel, first published in 1928, seems to have weathered the transition to the screen well. While, as in any epic, it has been pared down, it maintains the spirit and zest of its source. Carrying the entire venture is the performance of Tilda Swinton, who was stupendous in the Derek Jarman film *Edward II*. While it seems difficult to accept the conceit that Tilda is a man in the earlier parts of the film, she blossoms into a vibrant and sensual

woman later on.

The film is episodic, jumping its centuries and sometimes appearing to be a series of photographs. But the adventures pick up steam, and as we leave England for the more exotic east, it takes on a Münchhausenian quality. Director Potter has wisely peppered her action with both a wry humor (Orlando has the conceit of now and again addressing the audience directly in a series of comments or asides not unlike Groucho Marx) and a Barbary Coast of clever and seasoned actors such as Quentin Crisp as the doddering Queen, the superb character actor John Wood as the Archduke Harry, and a bravura turn by Heathcote Williams as the poet Greene.

Visually, the film is expansive. On a budget of \$4 million, Potter has accomplished what Hollywood might have conceived for \$40 million but without the soul. What Potter exposes is the faux pomp and impropriety of both monarchism and the oppressed woman of ages old. She also sheds light on the ability of simple human connection to fly in the face of the clash of cultures. When Orlando is appointed ambassador to Arabia he encounters the khan — played with charm and élan by Lothaire Bluteau — the two form a fraternal bond that seems to bore through the requirements of both their stations. When war breaks out and Orlando is forced to shoot to save himself and defend his friend, he tries to aid a dying soldier from the other side and is informed, "He's not a man. He's the enemy!" thus exposing the very nature of killing a war.

As we jump from the 18th to the 19th century, Orlando wakes from one of his many long sleeps to discover, low and behold, he possesses the body of a ravishing female. There seems to be no change in soul or personality, and perhaps it is this which is the core of Woolf's philosophy. Soon she encounters the stalwart, masculine, sensual Shelmerdine, an American revolutionary played with true matinee-idol charm by Billy Zane. Here Orlando finds her true love, conceives a child but refuses to become chattel no matter how attractive the paramour.

Another sleep causes her to awaken in the midst of the fields of World War I about to give birth to a daughter. Here we see, in the final chapter, the full flowering of Orlando as 20th-century woman extended through her offspring — happy and free to live a full life, worried not about possessions or propriety as she hops her motorcycle to review the ancestral home that once was hers and can be no more. ☼



Sasha (Charlotte Valandrey) and Orlando (Tilda Swinton) in *Orlando*, a film by Sally Potter