FILM REVIEWS

The Girl With the Needle review: A dark, macabre tale of a Danish serial killer

A contender for Palme d'Or at the Cannes, Swedish director Magnus von Horn's film is centred on Dagmar Johanse Amalie Overby, who was convicted of murdering nine newborn babies between 1913 and 1930

Gautaman Bhaskaran
2 June 2024 7:30 AM

Sometimes the most macabre movies remain etched in the memory. The Swedish contender at Film Festival contender for the Palme d'Or, Magnus von Horn's *The Girl With the Needle*, is a classic example. I walked into the auditorium at Cannes, which I have covered for 30 years, with a clear understanding of what I was likely to encounter. However, the images that unfolded before me shook me up considerably even though I am accustomed to blood, gore, and the most unpleasant scenes as a critic.

In stark black and white, *The Girl With the Needle*, set in Copenhagen in the aftermath of the World War I, begins with the faces of the most grotesque kind. Helmed by Horn, a Swede who has made Poland his home, the work is a true story of a baby killer who lived in Denmark during 1921 – a Europe that lay shattered after World War I (1914-18). What I saw on the large screen was sheer hypnotic horror, a kind of crime that was unimaginably vicious and grim to the core. But yes, much like the Master of the Macabre, Alfred Hitchcock, Von Horn keeps the horrific and the disturbing below the carpet. It is subtle, it is stylishly mounted and performed with panache.

Also Read - Garudan review: Well-written rural drama on friendship and betrayal

The Story of a Danish Serial Killer

Von Horn is a Cannes veteran. His sophomore Polish feature *Sonata* – starring Magdalena Koscielniak as Sylwia, a Polish nurse who is hospitalised for a mysterious ailment for intervals – was part of the Official Selection at the Festival in 2020. Earlier, in 2015, his Swedish debut feature, *Intruz (The Here After)*, played in the Director's Fortnight – a sidebar that runs along with the main Festival — at the Cannes. It roped in Vic Carmen Sonne and Time Dyrholm to portray one of Denmark's most notorious homicide cases. The movie focuses on people living precariously on the margins. One might liken it to a fairytale, albeit a dark and depressing one. Despite a good friend's warning before I stepped into the theatre, I still found myself unprepared for its impact.

Dyrholm essays Dagmar Johanne Amalie Overby, a real-life Danish serial killer, who was eventually convicted of murdering nine newborn babies between 1913 and 1920. Ghastly as it may sound, one of them was her lover. The rest came from unwed mothers, who naively believed that she was finding foster families for their children. *The Girl With the Needle* also follows a young woman, Karoline (Sonne), a seamstress who has her boyfriend Peter (Besir Zeciri) in the soldiers. She falls in love with the factory owner, lonely as she is with her husband missing in action. When she runs into Dagmar in a bathhouse (where she is trying to abort her child with a needle), a bond is forged between them. And the younger woman gives birth and hands her baby over to Dagmar, hoping her child will find a safe, loving home. "You have done the right thing," Dagmar tells Karoline and also the other mothers who seek help in finding foster parents.

Also Read - The Glassworker: Pakistan's first-ever 2D animated feature film ready for release

Not quite a fairytale

Although the plot weaves in and out like a fairytale, it is not quite that. The factory owner, Jorgen (Joachim Fjelstrup), initially seems head-over-heels in love with Karoline, but his mother is vile and villainous. She puts an end to the romance and throws the girl out on the streets. In the meantime, Karoline's heavily disfigured husband, Peter (Besir Zeciri), appears, and she struggles to accept a man who becomes a source of ridicule in the community, realising his only income could come from playing a freak in a travelling circus.

Van Horn and his co-writer, Line Langebek Knudsen, walk a tightrope, balancing the horrific truth with fiction in what feels like a docu-drama. Jagna Dobies's sets, especially Karoline's attic room filled with bird droppings, underscore the pain and pathos of a girl caught between a fleeting illusion (when Jorgen wake into her life) and sheer exploitation (when she is forced into a freak show). In first-rate performances, Dyrholm is fantastic, epitomising villainy while portraying Dagmar with a sincerity and sympathy that most will fall for, cleverly hiding the evil inside.

Some scintillating navigates Karoline's journey through its ups and downs. Sonne's performance is fantastic, and is palpable as she feels them before they are taken away. The story is stark and compelling, but one question remains: why does Dagmar murder the babies when she could have found homes for them? Is she a serial killer, or is she suffering from some form of lunacy? The film leaves this crucial question unanswered.

Cannes | film review

About the Author
Gautaman Bhaskaran
Gautaman Bhaskaran is a movie critic and commentator

Comments 0
Comments

SIMILAR POSTS

FILM REVIEWS

Garudan review: Well-written rural drama on friendship and betrayal
31 May 2024 4:05 PM

FEATURES

The Glassworker: Pakistan's first-ever 2D animated feature film ready for release
30 May 2024 5:30 AM

FILM REVIEWS

Barah by Barah review: A quiet, stirring requiem for Varanasi's past
28 May 2024 6:30 AM

FILM REVIEWS

All We Imagine As Light review: Payal Kapadia's bittersweet love poem to Mumbai
28 May 2024 6:30 AM

FILM REVIEWS

Bhaiyya Ji review: Manoj Bajpayee's 100th film is an uninspired mix of tropes, old...
26 May 2024 5:00 PM

FILM REVIEWS

Turbo review: In-form Mammootty revs up old-school action entertainer
26 May 2024 5:00 PM

FILM REVIEWS

Jaggi review: Annnol Sidhu's film is a haunting tale of survival and dignity
19 May 2024 6:30 AM

FILM REVIEWS

Gurusyasvor Ambalanadayil review: A Priyadarshan-style comedy that misses the mark
19 May 2024 5:30 PM

FILM REVIEWS

Star review: Feel-good, inspirational drama with flawed second half
19 May 2024 11:28 AM

FILM REVIEWS

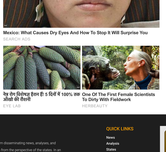
Monkey Man review: Crunching action elevates Dev Patel's directorial debut
4 May 2024 6:30 AM

FILM REVIEWS

Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire review: Paul Rudd & Co. rescue this fan-service sequel
27 Apr 2024 5:30 AM

FILM REVIEWS

Rathnam review: Vishal show in typical Hari entertainer
26 Apr 2024 7:47 PM

PROMOTED CONTENT


PREMIUM ACCESS
EXPIRES 31 Dec 2024
Unlimited access to The Federal's stories, analyses, and commentary, ad-free experience, richly curated newsletters
₹599/year*
Get Premium Access
Chat with us
Feedback

© 2024 THE FEDERAL. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. All images, videos and content are proprietary to The Federal.
Powered by Hocalwire