

Buffalo '66: "All my life I've been a lonely boy"

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Vincent Gallo's *Buffalo '66*, co-scripted by the director and Alison Bagnall, is one of the most beautiful and moving American films I have seen in a very long time. It deserves the support of every serious moviegoer.

Billy Brown (played by Gallo), just out of prison for something he didn't do, kidnaps a girl from a tap-dancing class so that he can have someone to present to his parents as his wife. Layla (Christina Ricci) is lonely too, and she falls in love with Billy during the course of an evening. In the end, the strength of feeling that develops between the two is enough to make Billy drop his plan to exact revenge on the man whose action, indirectly, landed him in jail.

The film communicates a level of anguish that is difficult to bear at times. Billy repeats virtually everything he says several times in rapid-fire fashion. He has to, no one has ever listened to him. Certainly not his parents (Angelica Huston and Ben Gazzara). His mother is an avid football fan, still bitter about having missed the game in which the Buffalo Bills won its only championship because she was giving birth to him. His father is tightfisted, cold and angry. They have albums filled with pictures of his mother with various football celebrities; they have one "Billy photo."

Layla does her best to impress his parents. "Make me look good," Billy has told the girl he's grabbed roughly out of dance class, "or I will never, ever talk to you again." She tells his mother and father that she thinks Billy is "the most handsome guy in the whole world." How had they met? Layla explains that she was a "lowly typist girl" for the CIA and Billy "a top agent." He was the "kindest, smartest, most handsome" man there. "He was like the king."

It's difficult to convey in print how well Ricci and Gallo (and Gazzara) deliver these banalities and others (Huston is less successful). Not a hint of condescension or derision, not a single wrong note. It could so easily have been utterly false. The lead performers treat their characters' pain and delusions with great earnestness as if they were, as they are, life-and-death matters.

The film's theatricality is a strong point. There is no fetish here about being "cinematic." Such considerations are

trivial, anyway. Everything is permissible in the effort to establish the truth. One of the film's most powerful scenes takes place in a bowling alley. Billy obviously enjoyed success bowling as a kid. His locker, which the owner has kept for him, is filled with trophies. He begins to bowl, making strike after strike. He turns to Layla, his arms raised over his head, "The kid is hot.... You saw it. Billy's back." An entire life is summed up in this pathetic, hopeless gesture!

At one point the girl gets to her feet, in her ridiculous baby-blue outfit, and imitates Billy— she approaches the foul line, releases an imaginary ball, watches the pins crash, turns and raises her arms in mock triumph. She's mimicking his silly gesture, she's getting back at him for pushing her around, she's establishing herself as a presence—Ricci conveys all that, without making the put-down too cruel or too punishing. It's also pouty, mischievous, enticing. Anyway, she has her own life, even if it's not much. And then the film's lights dim, a spotlight shines on her and she does her little tap-dance. It's an unforgettable moment. From then on, the film is about two human beings, not one.

Billy wants to love and be loved, but he can't stand physical contact. He's that isolated. Seated on the steps outside his parents' home, feeling ill at the thought of seeing them again, he tells Layla, "Would you hold me?" She does. "Don't touch me!" Later Billy and Layla get some pictures taken of themselves in the bowling alley photo booth, where you get four shots for two dollars. He intends to have her send the photos to his parents, one by one, over time, to prove that they're still married. Billy tells Layla that they should look "like we like each other. We span time as a couple. We're spanning time, we're in love. Look like you like me. We're in love, we're spanning time." When she kisses him—again: "Don't touch me! We're the couple that doesn't touch one another." It's funny and dreadful.

They rent a motel room, but not for sex. Billy takes a bath by himself. The girl, in the other room, says, "Can I come in there with you? ... I'm alone and I'm cold." Everyone in the film is always alone and always cold. Eventually, he relents,

as long as she promises not to look at him in the bathtub. Of course, she looks. “You look like a little boy.” They lie on the bed, fully clothed. Finally, they kiss. He leaves to carry out his revenge, not expecting to return.

But faced with a choice between life and death, surprisingly he picks life, the more difficult choice. He tells his friend on the phone, “I’ve got a girl. A girl who loves me. She’s pretty.... My girlfriend’s waiting for me.” In the film’s final, brief shot, Billy and Layla hold each other, his eyes are closed, she stares blankly. Their difficulties have just begun. Gallo is extraordinary, Ricci is equally extraordinary. One can’t imagine two other performers improving on what they’ve done.

Everything traumatizing is magnified and distorted in the film. (Even the facts about Buffalo’s football history, for example, are slightly off.) It is a child’s-eye view. “All my life I’ve been a lonely boy,” goes the song at the beginning of the film.

Certainly, there’s an element of self-indulgence, self-pity, perhaps egotism. Not everyone has the opportunity or feels the need, like Gallo, to dramatically recreate childhood and adolescent traumas. But the pain here is not individual, it is universal pain. Because I haven’t even spoken about how the film brings this city, Buffalo, to life, and every decaying American city. No film has ever given me such a visceral sense of the awfulness, the alienation of these cold, gray, unfriendly places. The cheap, the tacky, the second-rate. Restaurants, motels, bus stations. And in November, in raw weather, with little smudges of dirty snow on the ground.

Buffalo is an industrial city of a third of a million people, “located in the North Eastern part of United States, on the shores of Lake Erie and the beautiful Niagara River. Buffalo is only 25 miles from one of world’s seven natural wonders, the Niagara Falls,”(sic) according to the city’s official fact sheet. The city rose to prominence as the western terminal of the Erie Canal, completed in 1825, and ultimately became the largest grain handling port in the world. Due to its strategic location on the Great Lakes the city subsequently became a major industrial center, in steel and auto and chemicals.

Buffalo became infamous in the 1970s for Love Canal, a landfill into which Hooker Chemical had dumped 20,000 tons of 248 assorted chemicals. (The site has an estimated 130 pounds of dioxin, three ounces of which can kill in excess of 1 million people.) The chemicals at Love Canal will take 20,000 years to decompose. The city has a large number of contaminated and unused industrial sites, including 60 sites covered by the national toxic waste cleanup fund and more than 20 on New York state’s registry of inactive hazardous waste sites.

According to the New America Network’s *1996 Real*

Estate Planning Guide, “Buffalo is evolving from a smokestack-oriented and heavy manufacturing area to a high-tech, light manufacturing market. Suburban areas are seeing the construction of new office space, and healthy growth is occurring in the retail sector.” Somehow this hasn’t made itself felt in the lives of Gallo’s characters. They’re the “losers” in the new, global economy.

It’s shameful to see film critics, with six-figure salaries, echo this sort of language and refer to Billy and Layla, even while praising the film, as “lovable losers.” These commentators imagine that everyone lives like they do. It merely indicates how remote American films and critics are, in particular, from the realities of contemporary life. There is nothing exceptional about the physical and emotional conditions reproduced in the film; *millions* live in this forlorn, desperate manner. As a rule their lives simply aren’t represented on film. The phony exploits of math geniuses from the slums, sexy policewomen and well-heeled, empty-headed college kids are so much more interesting.

There is much more to be said. One might point out that works of art that fail to stir profound emotions are useless from nearly every point of view. There are still too many politically-conscious individuals who imagine that for a film to be valuable it must be a “panorama of great events.” But life and art are hardly exhausted by dramatizations of social laws as such. There is something chaotic, disturbing and tortured about this film, something that speaks far more powerfully than a hundred historical “epics” and a hundred carefully organized “social realist” dramas about the need to do away with all existing relations.

The real artist must be, *first of all*, deeply moved by the human condition. Theodore Dreiser, the novelist, would be so overcome by the state of things that he could break into tears walking down the street. The German filmmaker R. W. Fassbinder once told an interviewer early in his career something similar: “When I meet people in the streets and railway stations, see their faces and their lives, it fills me with despair. I often want to scream out loud.”

It’s difficult to see how Gallo will go from here. *Buffalo ‘66* is such a personal, in certain respects, autobiographical film, that one doesn’t know how he will follow up on it. Whatever Gallo does from now on, this film is an indelible contribution.



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