

The Nice Guys: Something, but not very much

(And, briefly, Terence Davies' *Sunset Song* and Hany Abu-Assad's *The Idol*.)

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The Nice Guys, directed by Shane Black, is set in smog-bound Los Angeles in 1977.

A star of pornographic films dies in a car crash. Her aunt, who swears she saw her niece alive after the accident, hires bumbling private detective Holland March (Ryan Gosling) to look into the matter. An obviously frightened associate of the dead actress, Amelia (Margaret Qualley), meanwhile hires enforcer Jack Healy (Russell Crowe) to "convince" March to desist from looking for her.

It turns out that the deceased woman, along with Amelia and several others, were working on an "experimental" film, *How Do You Like My Car, Big Boy?*, that was in part an exposé of the automobile industry for its polluting of the atmosphere and, specifically, its efforts to suppress the catalytic converter. Eventually, Healy and March team up to search for the now missing Amelia. They are joined by March's precocious, intrepid 13-year-old daughter, Holly (Angourie Rice), who disapproves of her father's often drunken and sometimes unscrupulous conduct. He is so incapacitated on a regular basis that Holly drives the two of them around!

Two other individuals involved in the controversial film's production turn up dead. When March and Healy encounter Amelia's mother, Judith Kutner (Kim Basinger), a high-ranking Department of Justice official, she suggests her daughter's claims that the auto companies are trying to murder her are delusional and attempts to point the investigators in another direction.

Various twists and turns and various shoot-outs later, *The Nice Guys* reaches its denouement at the Los Angeles Auto Show, where the anti-pollution protesters plan to screen *How Do You Like My Car, Big Boy?* before an unwitting audience and the media.

This is a peculiar film. It has likable elements, including its lead performances. Ryan Gosling, whose self-conscious acting is often irritating, is amusingly straightforward here. Angourie Rice is a delight, to a certain extent the most honest, substantial and moral presence in the film.

Black and co-screenwriter Anthony Bagarozzi have a definite feeling for certain social types and situations, especially those associated with the seedier fringes of the film industry. The dreadful, debauched "Hollywood party," on which a good deal of effort and feeling has obviously been lavished, is appropriately a pivotal sequence.

Corruption and grubbiness pervade Black's film. In an interview with *Coming Soon*, the director commented that *The Nice Guys* deals with a period when "although L.A. was still sort of the ultimate endgame destination for every American dreamer—they all wanted to

come to the Coast and they're streaming off the buses," what they found there was "not the prom queen they expected to meet, but the sort of demented Alzheimer's version, tottering around in the ripped dress. It's the fallen L.A. It's this sort of modern, latter-day Sodom and Gomorrah." As for the "fairytale party, where everyone's dressed up like Pinocchio or Rapunzel, they're fiddling while Rome burns. These people are having this ridiculous fantasy life in the backdrop of a city that's decaying around them."

These may have been the Black's central concerns, and they are legitimate ones, but they are not developed in anything close to a consistent fashion. *The Nice Guys* loses its way time and again, and generally not in an intriguing manner. The filmmakers rely on too many clichés and shortcuts (psychotic hitmen, quirky thugs and such) and too much pointless, time-wasting violence. Worse than that, they take a light-minded attitude toward a number of serious matters. For instance, making the death of a character a laughing matter, whether the individual is hateful or not, is a concession to a brutalized culture and, in fact, reinforces it.

And there are moments of inexcusable vulgarity, which are not "transgressive" or "anti-establishment," but simply unpleasant. Black may be genuinely appalled by certain degraded aspects of American life, but plunging in and nearly making a virtue of them is no answer.

Black made a name for himself by writing the screenplay for *Lethal Weapon* (1987). He subsequently wrote such films as *The Last Boy Scout* (1991) and *Last Action Hero* (1993). The first feature film he directed, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (2005), with Robert Downey, Jr. and Val Kilmer, is an occasionally entertaining film that suffers from some of the same defects as the present one: an uneven tone, a propensity to settle for cheap laughs, etc.

Black was born in 1961 and his decision to set his film in 1977 suggests that he has certain intuitions about the changes that took place in that period, when the mood, especially within the more prosperous or aspiring middle class, shifted significantly to the right, toward selfishness and social indifference.

Nominally, the villain of the piece is the American auto industry. In fact, the car companies did vigorously oppose the introduction of catalytic converters, declaring that the action would damage them, perhaps irreparably. General Motors (GM) vice president Earnest Starkman asserted that if the automakers were obliged to introduce the devices, "It is conceivable that complete stoppage of the entire [auto] production could occur." Ford president Lee Iacocca claimed that if the Environmental Protection Agency did not suspend the catalytic converter rule, "it will cause Ford to shut down."

In *The Nice Guys*, Judith Kutner, the Justice Department official, justifies her perfidious actions by asserting that “what’s good for Detroit is good for America,” paraphrasing the aphorism attributed to GM chief executive Charles E. Wilson.

But, really, the almost passing reference to the car companies is all a red herring (one of many). There is nothing concrete or convincing about the indictment of the automakers, and no one is likely to be the slightest bit affected by or even remember it. Remarkably, we never see more than a few seconds of the incendiary “exposé/experimental film” that ought to be at the center of *The Nice Guys*.

There is something here, but not nearly enough!

Sunset Song

We commented on *Sunset Song* at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival.

Terence Davies’ *Sunset Song* is based on the well-known 1932 Scottish novel by Lewis Grassie Gibbon. Davies (*The Long Day Closes*, *The House of Mirth*, *Of Time and the City*) is an immensely sensitive filmmaker, but his adaptation of the novel is oddly dissatisfying.

The story, set in the early 20th century, involves a farming family eking out an existence in northeast Scotland. The patriarch (Peter Mullan) is as hard and unsympathetic as a closed fist. His wife, worn out by painful births, eventually takes her own life and those of her two youngest children. Chris Guthrie (Agness Deyn), the eldest daughter in the family, is deserted by her beloved brother, the victim of their father’s brutality, who takes off for greener pastures in Canada.

After her father’s death, Chris marries Ewan Tavendale, a young farmer, and the pair spend some happy time together. However, the shadow of World War I falls across this isolated region too. Under the pressure of public opinion and against his better judgment, Ewan enlists and is sent off to France, where he experiences the horrors of trench warfare. When he comes home on leave, he is a transformed human being. One tragedy follows the other.

Davies’ *Sunset Song* is a lovely film, but its focus and center are not at all clear. The first line of the film, spoken by Chris to a school-friend, is this: “Is your father a socialist?” And a discussion of equality and the French Revolution soon takes place. However, much of the film is devoted to the sadism of Mullan’s character, which the actor, frankly, overdoes and which becomes a bit tedious.

World War I, a central fact of the story (and the period!), one would think, comes in rather late—almost as an afterthought. In Toronto, when a WSWS reporter asked Davies, who seemed somewhat demoralized by the state of the world, at a public screening whether his film was intended to be taken as an “anti-war” statement, the filmmaker looked bemused and replied, no, no, it was merely about “forgiveness” and such. Something is muddled.

Joanne Laurier: Hany Abu-Assad’s *The Idol*

The following comment by Joanne Laurier was also part of the

coverage of the 2015 Toronto film festival. The talented Palestinian filmmaker Hany Abu-Assad’s *The Idol* was shot on location in Gaza, the first film made in the Israeli-devastated enclave in many decades. Other locations included Jenin, Amman, Beirut and Cairo.

Abu-Assad’s film is based on a true story. It recounts how, in 2013, 22-year-old wedding singer Mohamad Assaf, from a refugee camp in Gaza, won the second season of *Arab Idol*, the Middle East version of the American talent show. Assaf became an overnight sensation and was named a United Nations Goodwill Ambassador.

The movie is very energetic, but a more sanitized and official work than Abu-Assad’s previous films, which include *Paradise Now* (2005) and *Omar* (2013). Its best moments portray the monumental difficulties faced by the Palestinian population in Gaza. In one quasi-humorous scene, there is a power outage—obviously a frequent occurrence—when the singer is auditioning via Skype and the generator catches on fire, ending his immediate chances. In other sequences, Abu-Assad’s camera takes in Gaza’s mountains of rubble and destruction.

Getting into Egypt to audition in Cairo obliges Mohamad to scale barbed-wire capped walls, bribe certain border guards and sing verses from the Koran to others, only to find the auditions closed to those who do not already have a ticket. He overcomes that obstacle too. All the while, he recalls the words of his beloved, teenage sister who died because the family lacked the cash for a kidney transplant: “We are going to be big and change the world.”

The film is clearly an attempt to find something uplifting in what is a catastrophic situation. “It’s not just about the winning, but the route to the winning,” says Abu-Assad. “The story of Gaza is very interesting to me. It’s about people who have been collectively punished, and yet they have this will to survive, the will to succeed. It’s a universal theme.”

At the movie’s screening in Toronto, the crowd cheered wildly, identifying with the Palestinian singer’s struggles and triumph. Abu-Assad must be well aware, however, that this is a fascinating but unique incident, which will not in any way change the abominable conditions of the Gazans.



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