

The Eddy: Struggling musicians in Paris—how unprepared artists are for the present situation!

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5 June 2020

“Art showed a terrifying helplessness, as always in the beginning of a great epoch.” Leon Trotsky

The Eddy is an eight-part series on Netflix set in contemporary Paris.

Its central figure is Elliot Udo (André Holland), the expatriate, African American owner of a jazz club, The Eddy, as well as a composer and former pianist. As the series opens, Udo and his business partner, Farid (Tahar Rahim), are struggling to keep their establishment afloat. Adding complications, Elliot’s headstrong teenage daughter Julie (Amandla Stenberg) arrives from the US.

There are various tensions within the house band, which includes Maja (Joanna Kulig of *Cold War*), the Polish-born singer and Elliot’s once and future lover; Randy (American Randy Kerber) on piano; bassist Jude (Cuban-born Damian Nueva); saxophone player Jowee (Jowee Omicil, a Haitian-Canadian); trumpet player Ludo (French-born Ludovic Louis) and drummer Katarina (Croatian Lada Obradovic). They are hoping Franck Levy (Benjamin Biolay), the owner of a small but prestigious label, will offer them a record deal.

Seven of the eight episodes are named after individual characters (“Elliot,” “Julie,” “Amira,” “Jude,” “Maja,” “Sim” and “Katarina”) and the final part is named after the venue or theme song itself.

Jack Thorne is *The Eddy*’s principal writer-creator, with other writing contributions from Rebecca Lenkiewicz, Rachel Delahay, Hamid Hlioua and Phillip Howze. Damien Chazelle (*Whiplash*, *La La Land*), Houda Benyamina, Laïla Marrakchi and Alan Poul each directed two episodes of the series, whose characters speak primarily English and French, but also Arabic and Polish.

The band members are all gifted musicians and perform jazz pieces mostly composed by Kerber and Glen Ballard over the course of the eight episodes.

A number of dramas are taking place simultaneously in *The Eddy*. As noted, the club is in financial distress. Co-owner Farid is slain in the first episode, the tragic consequence apparently of his efforts to tackle the club’s problems by entering into deals with crooks. The investigation of Farid’s murder and Elliot’s

endeavors to thwart the gangsters’ plans to take over the nightspot remain stressful, inescapable elements throughout. At a certain point, the police begin to apply their own pressure on Udo.

His daughter Julie’s struggle to find a place for herself and a parent who will give her some undivided attention forms another strand of the narrative. She befriends Sim (Adil Dehbi), a young man from an immigrant family, who has musical and personal ambitions. Farid’s widow Amira (Leïla Bekhti) and her two children have their intense grief to work through and overcome. Jude, the bassist, has a broken heart and a drug habit to confront. The band’s singer, Maja, who has an ongoing and not very happy or satisfying relationship with Elliot, receives the offer of a job as a backup singer to a popular star that would provide economic security. Katarina knows more than she first lets on about the gangsters and Farid’s involvement with them.

There are appealing aspects of *The Eddy*, including, for the most part, the actors—among them, Holland (*Selma*, *Moonlight*)—and the musicians themselves. The music is likeable although not earthshaking, occasionally summoning up that smoky, sensual, dark blue mood that only jazz can stimulate. The Paris locations are picturesque in a relatively unglamorous fashion. The multiethnic, multilingual character of the series also strikes a favorable chord. Its final moments are decent and empathetic.

However, in my view, the weaknesses of *The Eddy* considerably outweigh its strengths. First of all, stripped of its more exotic trappings, the eight-part miniseries runs true to form in offering up once again what have become the staple, quasi-obligatory motifs and themes of contemporary filmmaking and television drama: the sexual abuse of children (or hints of it), the failure of lovers to “commit” to one another, the inability of mothers and fathers to make time for their emotionally drowning sons or daughters, the effort of parents to overcome the trauma of losing a child, attempts by a husband or wife to deal with the pain of losing a mate, etc., to which one must add the ultimate cliché: the presence of sinister Eastern European lowlives, the root of all evil as far as contemporary filmmaking is concerned.

Nearly all of it, virtually every ounce of it, is private, personal crisis, which becomes largely tedious and, at times, even irritating.

(What's more, no doubt Elliot is obliged to go to the police to deal with the dangers posed by the criminals—but that his “coming clean” to the cops and entering into a close relationship with them is at the center of his moral and emotional rebirth is somehow telling.)

The atmosphere pervaded by self-absorption and even self-pity is the greatest drawback. One would think there were no greater issues on Earth than the trivial ones under consideration here.

In eight hours, with dozens of artists present and accounted for, not a single reference to other, more general problems and the conditions of life for other portions of the population? No, not one. It may be possible to be so selfish, but then such an outlook deserves to be criticized. To be certain, Chazelle and company are not the most advanced artists, but would “more advanced” artists proceed in a fundamentally different manner? We see no proof of it. “Politics” to the overwhelming majority of artists at present, conventional or “radical,” means sexual, gender and racial politics.

The self-absorption imposed on the female characters in particular is an impediment. The episode devoted to Julie's character is especially insufferable. (A note made during the viewing reads “excruciating.”) The young girl's attitude, when interacting with others during the course of this hour or so, might be reduced to: “Yes, yes, but what about me?” “That's fine, but what about me?” “Enough about that—what about me? What about me? What about me!” Fortunately, Stenberg shows better, less selfish sides of her character much later in the series.

Bekhti as the widow Amira suffers from the same general affliction, the combination of smug, sometimes outraged entitlement and great doses of feeling sorry for herself. One of the awful consequences for art of the identity politics that has consumed a broad swathe of the professional middle classes is the shortcutting (or short-circuiting) it permits and even encourages. A female character, especially a “female character of color,” simply has to show up and the viewer is expected to respond with sympathy, support, admiration, even awe, without regard to what the given character may do or say. Nothing has to be built up or proven dramatically in such a case, no artistic work actually has to be done; it is simply assumed that the positive reaction will take place on schedule. Such an approach is fatal to serious and convincing art.

In general, the characters in *The Eddy*, male and female, are at their least compelling in the episodes devoted to them—we get to spend more time in their presence and the weakness of the conceptions emerges. These are individuals, when one gets to know them, who turn out not to have much to say. For example, Maja is rather unpleasant and quarrelsome in “her” episode, including in a gratuitous and pointless sequence with

her mother that has no apparent purpose aside from providing the younger woman an opportunity to complain, but otherwise relatively levelheaded.

The one female character who does not appear consumed with herself is the drummer Katarina, even after she receives a terrible beating from the gangsters. Lada Obradovic gives one of the most intriguing performances in the series.

The appearance of *The Eddy* in the midst of the pandemic and now the mass protests over police violence obviously throws the difficulties into sharp, forceful relief. One is less forgiving in the present circumstances. Some 110,000 people in the US and 30,000 in France are dead as a result of the coronavirus and the neglect and cruelty of the authorities. The president of the United States has launched an attempted coup d'état, without facing opposition from the media or the Democratic Party.

The artists, even the finest ones and even at the “best of times,” always lag far behind events. The past four decades in particular have only exacerbated this tendency. Many ideological tendencies, including “left” or radical forms of subjectivism, have been at work on filmmakers and others promoting self-obsession and social indifference. Many took this notion to heart: “Nothing can be done about the world; one must concentrate on oneself.”

Great events have begun to erupt and crash over people's heads. Of course, the particular form of the trigger event, whether a pandemic or a murder committed by a policeman, could not be foreseen, but that American and world capitalism were heading toward disaster and that a vast social collision was imminent, that could be and was anticipated and warned about.

Filmmakers, musicians and other artists are among the least prepared segments of the population. Art is displaying the “terrifying helplessness” it always demonstrates at the beginning of a “great epoch” that Trotsky wrote about nearly a century ago. Much depends on the movement of the working class, the only social force capable of showing a way out of the present situation, and the growing influence of socialist ideas in that movement.



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