

Ricky and Mad Bills to Pay (or Destiny, dile que no soy malo): "Society is also something real..."

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Coincidentally, two films we discussed last year after viewing them at the San Francisco Film festival online are opening this month in theaters in the US: *Ricky* (directed by Rashad Frett) and *Mad Bills to Pay (or Destiny, dile que no soy malo)*, from Joel Alfonso Vargas.

The two films present some of the same problems, some of the same problems that a good number of American (and not simply American) “small,” “realist” dramas exhibit.

They contain truthful moments and sequences, but on the whole they sidestep vital social contradictions and accept too much of the world as immediately given.

Ricky (directed by Rashad Frett) centers on its eponymous protagonist, a 30-year-old man from East Hartford, Connecticut, following his release from prison after 15 years for armed robbery. In other words, “the punishment begins.” He loses employment in a warehouse due to a background check. Holding a job is a condition of his parole. He learned barbering in prison, but that doesn’t offer much in terms of steady prospects. He is largely lost in his new conditions, including its modern technologies.

Virtually every relationship and encounter has an abrasive quality. Life is harsh, people are mostly rude and callous.

Ricky, like filmmaker Frett, comes from a Caribbean background. His religious mother and her friends exert their own particular pressure on him. He meets a young woman with a son who needs a haircut. Through interactions with her, we learn things about Ricky (he has no car, he lives with his mother, he doesn’t know his own cellphone number.) He meets another woman in his self-help group, who proves to be more volatile. This connection leads to a disaster.

“I’m here to make films that bring in humanity,” Frett told *Variety*. “Everything I do, I want to not only entertain our audience but inform them on what’s going on. Give them food for thought. To bring the audience a visceral perspective from a situation they’ve never experienced before.”

Ricky came from seeing a lot of family members go

through the criminal justice system and how they struggled to improve and find work, “and some resorted to their old ways,” Frett says, explaining the backstory for the project, which he co-wrote, produced and directed. “We wanted to shed light on this topic with this different type of coming-of-age story, where a 30-year-old adult is outside in the free world for the first time.

The ambitions are worthy ones, as far as they go, but the results are duller than they should be. Everything is rounded off to grey, to drabness, in the interests presumably of “realism.” But this is not truly realistic, as the mass demonstrations against Donald Trump and his policies reveal. America seethes with anger, and this is not simply inwardly focused or directed against other oppressed people.

Approximately two million people are in prison in the US. This is not the product of individuals making a large quantity of poor decisions. It is, above all, the result of sharp economic decline, the destruction of vast numbers of decent-paying manufacturing jobs, relentless and systemic poverty, the devastation of public education and the central fact that the US ruling class has no solution to its burning social ills except to throw people in jail.

Nor do people “resort to their old ways” merely out of personal irresponsibility. The “self-help” group of former convicts, with quasi-religious conceptions hovering in the background, is not actually that “helpful.” We want one of the people here to jump up and point out that the basic cause of their problems is poverty, that no one in the room is rich and that they’re all being sold a bill of goods. No such luck. There is too much submissiveness to the “authorized” version of things here. In the end, the severity of prison and neighborhood life reflects the essential brutality of social relations in America.

Vargas’s *Mad Bills to Pay (or Destiny, Dile Que No Soy Malo)* [“or Destiny, tell him/her I’m not bad”] suffers from similar sorts of weaknesses, from passivity and a lack of sharp social insight. Set in the Bronx, 100 miles or so from

East Hartford, the film follows Rico (Juan Collado), a 19-year-old Dominican American who is selling home-made (illegal) cocktails on the beach when we first meet him. He lives with his mother and sister in a small apartment, amidst a good deal of inevitable, economically driven friction.

Things only take a turn for the worse when Rico's girlfriend Destiny (Destiny Checo) discovers she is pregnant and moves in with Rico's family. His sister is particularly unfriendly and derisive. The situation is not promising. Inevitably, Destiny and Rico have a falling out. She moves out and returns to her mother. Rico is arrested for jumping a turnstile, and finds a lousy job cleaning up in a restaurant. Ultimately, he tells Destiny, "I want you back in my life," and makes an effort to stay on the straight and narrow.

The story gets a bit tedious. Without anger, protest, genuine non-conformism, the details of such lives are not that fascinating or illuminating.

Vargas, who mentions his admiration for problematic figures such as directors Martin Scorsese and Pedro Costa, explains that the film is

deeply personal, drawn from childhood memories—my family dynamics, the borough's hustler culture, those mad, hot New York City summers. Rico is an amalgamation of the guys I grew up around—kids forced into adult responsibilities too soon, raised with the expectation to "man up" despite having no blueprint for what that actually means. That tension—between the social pressure to be a man and the naïveté of still being a boy—sits at the heart of the film.

Bronx is the most impoverished borough in New York and contains the poorest congressional district in the US. Such things are apparently accepted in the film as immutable facts of nature. Instead,

Thematically, we're trying to understand Rico's misinterpretation of masculinity, and how that's really been impacted by a lack of a male figure—or a male role model/father figure—in his life.

pressures intensely—especially in New York and especially if you're living on the margin or below the margin, as I've seen firsthand. Those forces drive people to the limit, to the brink of insanity. Everywhere you look in the city, people are struggling with mental health, lacking structure and support, and so on.

Unfortunately, *Mad Bills to Pay* doesn't demonstrate even this degree of breadth or expansiveness. The film is claustrophobic and mildly depressing. The Bronx apartment is akin to a sealed tomb. It is not the responsibility of filmmakers to "point the way forward," but if they are not simply beating their heads against the wall in frustration, they surely must have an interest in indicating an *objectively existing* impulse for a type of social breakthrough. It would be far worse if one were to conclude that the filmmaker is content to leave his characters stewing in their misery.

As we have argued before,

Realism about life in any meaningful sense surely involves more than simply turning on a camera. Passivity and the inability or unwillingness to criticize or render serious judgment have all too often been passed off in recent decades as evenhandedness and "lack of bias." To look at the world with an artist's eyes and *draw no important conclusions* has nothing in common with genuine objectivity.

"Since real people live on earth and in society," the 19th century Russian critic Belinsky noted, "and not in the air, not in the clouds, where only phantoms live, the writers of our day are naturally portraying society as well as people. Society is also something real, and not imaginary, therefore its essence is made up not only of costumes and hairstyles, but also of customs, habits, concepts, relations, etc."

It's worth repeating: Society *as such* is something real, and its essence is made up not only of clothing, externals, the surface of everyday life, but also of more profound *customs, habits, concepts, relations* and so forth. Among the artists we need more realistic historians of contemporary society.

Although Vargas told another interviewer

There's something about the systems in which we live under capitalism where you're feeling these



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