

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "THE BLACK DAHLIA"

It's not that there isn't enough mystery in "The Black Dahlia." There's simply too much. And the biggest mystery of all: How is it that the performance with the most life belongs to a dead girl?

The dead girl in question is Elizabeth Short, nicknamed the Black Dahlia because of her penchant for the color black and in reference to a 1946 movie called "The Blue Dahlia." On January 15, 1947, the aspiring starlet's body was found in a vacant lot in L.A., cut in two, drained of blood and eviscerated. Between the gruesome crime scene photos, the flashy nickname and the headlines splashed on every newspaper in the country, the Black Dahlia's death was posthumously labeled "the first media-manufactured murder." Short fulfilled her quest for celebrity—even though she unwittingly had to give up her life to get it.

The film's screenplay is based on James Ellroy's 1987 multi-layered novel of the same name. Josh Hartnett, who plays protagonist Bucky Bleichert, said, "There were 18 different versions of the script. It started out being 210 pages long and worked its way down to about 120 or 130—the story is so complex." And that's what makes this murder murder. The plot has as many twists and turns as all those L.A. canyons put together. Try to enjoy the ride as the scenery whizzes by. But don't look too closely—you'll get disoriented.

But oh, that scenery. The look of the film is almost worth the price of admission. Bathed in sepia tint, this 1947 isn't an homage to glory days, but a nod to grittier, nastier times. The dingy buildings, the previous owners' signs barely scratched out, the cramped apartments, the smoke-filled station house—if this were a collage of still pictures, it would be stunning. But unfortunately, Mr. De Palma, this is a moving picture—hence the need to move, both in plot, character and pacing. Nerts.

Though the streets may be ugly, "The Black Dahlia" is peopled with breathtaking women, all dressed up and everywhere to go—as long as they can rely on some male's arm for support and/or rescue. Though Hillary Swank's Madeleine and Scarlett Johansson's Kay look like a million bucks, it might be in a guy's best interest to question where and how they got their funding.

The two cops hot on the case are Aaron Eckhart's Lee and Josh Hartnett's Bucky. As the hotheaded yet savvier of the partners, Eckhart finally gets his chance to break out of his previous smarmy-boy persona. Though he's still Mr. Charm on the outside, he succeeds in peeling back a few new layers, driving himself into a Benzedrene-popping obsession for the Dahlia.

Unfortunately, Hartnett doesn't fare as well. Although he's nicknamed "Ice," in contrast to Eckhart's more volatile "Fire," he's more "nice" than "ice," a puzzled puppy dog wandering around the hazy plot points, his leash trailing limply behind, as if his master had deserted him in the first act.

Which brings us to the deceased Elizabeth Short, brilliantly portrayed by Mia Kirshner in a series of screen test flashbacks. She flirts, cajoles, pleads straight into the camera as she attempts to win over her faceless auditioners. It's in this character's aching sadness, her fingers nervously picking yet another run in her stockings, that we see the heart not only of the Black Dahlia, but of every love-starved human who keeps trying on new costumes and faces, trying out different acts, hoping to someday get it right.

This film, trying on too many plots, themes and acts, didn't get it right. Though sometimes pretty, sometimes breathtaking – it's ultimately as empty as the Dahlia herself.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: C-plus

Production Credits: "The Black Dahlia" Directed by Brian De Palma Screenplay by Josh Friedman
Based on the Novel by James Ellroy Cast: Josh Hartnett, Scarlett Johansson, Aaron Eckhart, Hilary Swank,
Mia Kirshner, Rated: R Running Time: 121 minutes Grade: C plus

The Screen Savor: "Short-Lived"™ by Kimberly_Gadette