

MOVIE REVIEW

'Mala Noche': First Flush of a Love for Film

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In "Mala Noche," screenwriter-director Gus Van Sant has made a movie about passion that's actually passionate. Ardor is built right into the imagery.

Made in 1985 for \$25,000, shot in black-and-white 16-millimeter film, this was Van Sant's first feature (his second is the current critical hit "Drugstore Cowboy") and it has the rapturous quality that debut films by highly talented directors often have.

The ardor in this film (at the Nuart through Tuesday) isn't only in its love story; it's also in Van Sant's experimental, poetic use of the medium. Maybe that's why the doomed, unrequited romantic passion at its core nevertheless seems weirdly, vibrantly hopeful. Van Sant can't pretend true nihilism because he's too enraptured by the possibilities of his new-found art.

The unrequited passion is between Walt (Tim Streeter), who runs a Skid Row convenience store in Portland, and Johnny (Doug Cooyate), a Mexican boy in his late teens. The down-and-outers who frequent Walt's store are a passing parade of winos and derelicts, and yet he feels at home here. He walks the littered streets like the neighborhood's self-appointed mayor.

Since Portland is also a faraway gathering place for young men who have crossed the Mexican border illegally, Walt has a more than academic interest in cruising its byways. The sullen unreachability of these drifters touches off in him an obsessional quest for true love. Johnny, who taunts Walt's passion without satisfying it, becomes Walt's fantasy dreamboat.

Adapting a semi-autobiographical novella by the Portland poet Walt Curtis, Van Sant makes Walt's tantalization believable, but he also has the wit to show us Johnny for what he really is—that is, as less than a carnal deity. The film is caught up in Walt's avid, half-mad pursuit without endorsing it.

Van Sant is also canny in the way he sets up the racial caste system between Walt and Johnny and his friends. Low on the social ladder as he is, Walt realizes he's still in a privileged position compared to the Mexican drifters, who covet his conveniences. They covet them, and want to destroy them, too. Joyriding in Walt's car, Johnny gleefully bangs it up. The Mexicans' contempt for the gringo is mixed with cold calculation. At least one of the boys, Roberto (Ray Monge), is willing to have sex with Walt in return for money and a



Tim Streeter finds love and danger in Van Sant's "Mala Noche."

place to shack up. Johnny and Roberto's illusionless outlawry is their way of both surviving the streets and one-upping the gringos, whose homosexuality they abhor.

Tim Streeter, the only professional actor in the cast, is the ideal performer for Van Sant. He embodies the film's intuitive shifts of mood—you're never quite sure what he's up to—but he's also a recognizably grounded character. A poetic shimmer may surround him, but he's for real. When he mouths broken Spanish to his inamorata, his halting speech is meant to convey the genuineness of his love. We can see how Walt survives his lustful obsession by *delighting* in it. He's tickled by the sheer force of his own folly. His self-amazement is implicitly narcissistic—it's the source of his eroticized view of life.

It may be the source of Van Sant's view as well. In "Mala Noche," as in "Drugstore Cowboy," Van Sant is working out of an exalted, self-reflective mindscape. Everything he looks at—a waterfall, clouds, the white line on the highway reflected in a character's sunglasses—has a mysterious, impacted force, as if they were pieces in a dream mosaic.

At the same time, the characters are caught in a pop continuum not unlike Godard's or Warhol's: restaurant neon signs, cigarette packs, product displays all have talismanic import. There's something primitive yet deeply sophisticated and modern about Van Sant's approach: He recognizes the emptiness of the pop landscape but also understands how that emptiness validates people's lives. In "Mala Noche" (Times-rated Mature for brief nudity and strong language), emptiness is a kind of solace, a turn-on. In these lower depths, to experience it is at least to know you're still kicking.

'MALA NOCHE'

A Northern Film Co. production. Produced, written and directed by Gus Van Sant, from the novella by Walt Curtis. Music Creighton Lindsay. Cinematography John Campbell. Editor Van Sant. With Tim Streeter, Doug Cooyate, Ray Monge.

Running time: 75 minutes.
Times-rated: Mature.