ARTS

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'Alpha Dog' is an extraordinary film which shows up the sentimentality of Hollywood. Emile Hirsch, above, plays drug dealer Johnny Truelove

Exposing Hollywood's deceit

FILM REVIEW
James Mumford

Alpha Dog

15 CERT, 117 MINS

This extraordinary film is not really "first date" material. A devastating critique of teenage soap opera, *Alpha Dog* takes up the genre of *The OC* (a popular American television series), raises it high, holds it aloft, then brings it crashing down to the ground. It is a bleak tragedy which demolishes Hollywood sentimentality and is, without doubt, one of the most important dramas of recent years.

Alpha Dog is based on events that occurred in November 1999 in Claremont, California. Adolescent drug-lord Johnny Truelove is owed money by various druggie peers. One teenager, Elvis, is so indebted that he's become Johnny's "slave". In one of many allusions to *Lord of the Flies* we watch on as, before a crowd of scantily clad party girls, one boy flaunts his power over another. Debtor Jake won't settle for such servility, and, after another failed drug deal puts him $30,000 in Johnny's debt, Jake flips out. He gets into a brawl with Johnny at a party, and trashes Johnny's house during the night. The next morning Johnny is set on retaliation, and bumps into Jake's 15-year-old brother Zack, who has just run away from his parents. On a whim Johnny commands his crew to kidnap the boy.

Nick Cassavetes, the writer and director, takes every opportunity to remind us that we're watching a true story, interspersing his drama with subtitles of dates and times as well as retrospective, documentary-style interviews with the main protagonists. Sadly, this spoils the ending and collapses the tension.

Annoyingly portentous storytelling is the only thing that distracts us from the film's world. Everything else – both sight and sound – is strong. The constant close-ups on the pallid faces; the red eyes of kids on drugs; the aggression of the hip-hop soundtrack. The details – guns under pillows. The language – innuendoes more imaginative and disgusting than you've ever heard; the violence – so reflex and spontaneous, so disproportionate.

But what makes the film so hard-hitting is not how explicit it is. The real shock comes when, just when you've settled for the stereotype, just when you feel you've placed this world as trailer-park America, the camera pans out to reveal beautiful bourgeois bungalows and the well-tended back-yards of sunburnt suburbia.

That isn't the only shock. The film really makes the most of what is the story's original feature – the nature of the kidnapping itself, the way Zack bonds with his captors. Stockholm syndrome meets teenage rebellion, making for probably the most bizarre hostage-captor scenario you'll ever find. The oddity generates a series of excruciatingly poignant moments (due above all to Anton Yelchin's deft depiction of impressionable youth as Zack).

Humour comes by way of Justin Timberlake, who reveals excellent comic timing in his role as Frankie,

The camera pans out to reveal bungalows and well-tended gardens, not trailer parks

the happy-go-lucky kidnapper constantly trying to wriggle his way out of trouble (he is a well-cast dancer, too). In terms of celebrity performances Timberlake's is trumped only by Sharon Stone's, who plays Zack's mother with the help of a genius make-up artist who fills her out to 200 lbs. Mention must finally be made of Ben Foster's mesmerising peformance as Jake, whose rubbery face emits expressions it's hard to believe are not generated by a computer.

Alpha Dog's most profound insight is on the subject of parenting in 21st-century Western society. "Come smoke a doobey with your old man," says Frankie's father when he walks in on the middle of his dad's Friday night ménage-a-trois (which doesn't stop the father from waking Frankie at 8 am to make him mow the lawn and water the majijuana plants). The theme is, in fact, signaled right from the get-go, with Johnny's father (Bruce Willis) telling us in the film's first retrospective documentary interview that "this whole thing is about parenting, protecting your children", before offering to collaborate with another of his son's drug deals. Here is a world where "young boys and girls / Are level now with men"; a society of fatherlessness even when the fathers are actually there; where parental authority has been eroded.

This study in parenting is the prime example of what I began by hailing as the film's assault on sentimentality. For soaps like *The OC* are morally unacceptable not because they are explicit but because they are deceitful. You are shown the pleasure of the one night stand, but not the depression that follows; you are shown the euphoria of the "hit", but not the terror of the come-down or the horror of the events which, in reality, are induced.

But this film refuses to cut out context and consequences; it is determined to show where they lead. In terms of moral education, *Alpha Dog* achieves more in an hour and a half than do PHSE lessons in five years of secondary school.

Even typewriters get involved in the song

THEATRE REVIEW
Alan Geary

Merrily We Roll Along

DERBY PLAYHOUSE

You won't come out of this production humming the show-stopper – Sondheim's not like that. But you will be changed, elevated even, in the way you have a right to expect from significant theatre. And you'll be vastly entertained.

Initially, all is not well. In a worldly sense, composer Frank Shepard (played by an exceptional Glyn Kerslake) is at the summit of his career, but he sits at a grand piano in despair wondering where it all went wrong. People from the past appear in his imagination and sing an overture. In *Merrily We Roll Along* time isn't suspended while everyone downs tools for a burst of song and dance; it is as much opera as musical.

In an attempt to find out just what did go wrong, the action runs backwards from 1976 to 1957, a reversal which generates massive dramatic ironies throughout. It ends/begins, the world fresh and hopeful, on a New York rooftop with the denizens of an apartment block marvelling at the Sputnik passing overhead.

The Broadway premiere bombed; it had young actors starting out old and steadily getting younger. Here, old actors are made to look progressively younger, and it works.

So what exactly is Frank's problem? He is estranged from wife and child, but also from his collaborator, lyricist Charley Kringas (Glenn Carter, who has shone in previous Playhouse Sondheims), who, along with Mary Flynn, was also his deepest friend. Kringas has just won a Pulitzer for some serious work while Mary (Eliza Lumley), once a writer of promise, is now an overweight soak with a wrecked marriage behind her.

Acting, sharp and deliberately over-emphatic, is never allowed to become hammy. There are some cracking one-liners but, more importantly, the interplay of music and text is uncannily skilful. At the same time as singing, actors are speaking true to character and situation. Diction is never less than totally clear. Choreography is gutsy. Redolent of the 1950s Broadway musical, *Merrily We Roll Along* uses Broadway as its subject and is a critique of most of the things that Broadway stands for.

There is critique, too, in the film sequences projected on to a screen. Whatever else this show is about, it exposes the shallowness, avarice and power of the popular media. Film is also used to deepen characterisation and to locate the action in the context of the wider American world. Parallels with the shattered Kennedy myth are emphasised.

Dan Potra's revolving set is particularly effective, for instance when Gussie Carnegie (Julie-Alanah Brighten) is on stage and the set revolves to show Frank, Charlie and co in the street outside the stage door, peering in to sample the applause.

Gussie, a selfish, exploitative marriage-breaker and an advocate of the doctrine of hedonism, is finally a sympathetic character, washed up and supplanted by fickle fashion and a younger blonde in Frank's life.

The evening is packed with wonderful moments. Mary, typing with one hand, is phoning the garret on the other side of town where Frank sits at his piano composing and Charlie is knocking out plays at his desk. As the trio speak and sing, the typewriters become musical instruments.

Sondheim seems to use Frank to encapsulate the tensions which, by all accounts, have troubled his own life. A Sondheimian number is sung straight by Charlie, with Frank at the piano. But, at Gussie's behest, it is adulterated into conventional Broadway slush. Extrapolation from an artist's work to the artist himself is always dangerous. Nonetheless, one is tempted to draw parallels between the struggle in Frank's career – "Shall I compromise and plump for conventional success or shall I stick with Charlie?" – and Sondheim's own. We've all profited from his refusal to go down the same road as Frank.

After a string of outstanding productions, many of them also under the direction of Karen Louise Hebden, Derby Playhouse has produced yet another triumph.

Left: Charley, Frank and Mary

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Better to shut one's eyes

THEATRE REVIEW

Stiffelio

ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

A Protestant minister returns home to find that his wife has had a liaison during his absence. He intends to divorce her, until he opens the Bible at random during his service and chances on the passage about the woman taken in adultery. He forgives her in the presence of the congregation.

The Italian ecclesiastical censors in the 1850s gave Giuseppe Verdi's opera a mauling. They objected to a clergyman being married; they objected to Lina asking Stiffelio to hear her confession, not as her husband, but as her priest, and they objected to the last act taking place in a church with the Bible being read out. Verdi, using about half of the original score, reworked the opera, set the story in the 13th century and turned the pastor into an English crusader called Aroldo. *Stiffelio*, as a result, disappeared from the repertory and was not seen professionally for well over 100 years.

The fallen bourgeois heroine, filled with shame and remorse, longing for forgiveness and redemption, is one of the most popular clichés of 19th-century art and literature. Elijah Moshinsky's fine, realistic production, designed by Michael Yeargan, transfers the action to America. Sondra Radvanovsky responds splendidly to the challenges of the penitent wife, but her lover is so lacking in sex appeal that you wonder what she sees in him (even more so when Jose Cura, a sterling vocal and physical presence, is cast as her husband).

Koanga

SADLER'S WELLS

Frederick Delius's opera is an excellent choice for Pegasus, a company which is committed to giving opportunities to singers from minority ethnic backgrounds. Koanga is a West Indian prince and voodoo priest who refuses to work as a slave on a Louisiana plantation. He falls in love with Palmyra, a mixed-race slave girl who, on their wedding day, is abducted by the brutal white foreman.

The last time the opera was seen in London was 35 years ago, when – despite the embarrassment of a blacked-up white chorus – it made a much better impression than it does now in Helena Kaut-Howson's uninspired and old-fashioned production, which is sung within a colourless, empty and totally non-atmospheric set. She has no idea what to do with the chorus, who are left standing around, uncertain how to react. The acting is amateurish throughout and barely one word is audible. On the whole it is best to shut one's eyes and just listen to Delius's lush romantic score and its fine ensembles. Alison Buchanan's singing of Palmyra's final aria is the high spot of a disappointing evening.

The Hound of the Baskervilles

DUCHESS THEATRE

The greatest detective in the world made his stage debut in 1899. It was William Gillette's play, incidentally, which introduced the iconic deerstalker. Since then there has been an endless supply of stage, film, television and radio adaptations. There has even been a ballet.

The present production relies on three actors playing all the parts, quick changes, silly business and plenty of dry ice. It's in the same vein as *The 39 Steps* spoof at the Criterion, though nothing like as good. It also suffers from the fact that the actors don't look like Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, or rather they don't look like Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce, the actors in the definitive 1939 film. An incomprehensible Spanish Holmes is a poor joke.

Break Out!

PEACOCK THEATRE

The Koreans have had a big success with *Jump*. The B-Boy dance moves are fantastic, but the actual slapstick comedy still needs a lot of editing and rethinking before it is ready for grown-up consumption.

Robert Tanitch

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