

# RATCATCHER

## NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS REVIEW

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In "Ratcatcher," Lynne Ramsay serves up childhood in the Glaswegian housing projects as if we were watching it unravel out of two separate, embattled eyes, one innocent, the other jaded. Quite often you don't know which gaze to trust -- the film's lack of a cohesive narrative likens it to an evocative yet scattered short story collection. And it careens far too often from the miserable to the whimsical that you're never quite sure whether Ramsay's trying to be dour or delightful.

Yet far from conflicted in its masterful depiction of working-class tenement life, this assured first feature manages to transcend the boundaries of traditional social realism that have rendered working class life as so predictable (for example, Brenda Blethyn keening from the back patio.)

Smartly shirking Dickensian squalor and sentimentality in favor of a gritty humanism that touches on the transcendent, "Ratcatcher" emerges as surprisingly jubilant in its depiction of youthful abandon amid so much poverty. Intentionally or otherwise, Ramsay has given us the most wrenching portrait of a child's restless spirit since Truffaut's "The 400 Blows." Childhood stinks, "Ratcatcher" suggests with pungent precision, though it's never without fleeting moments of fancy and beauty.

Set during a garbage strike in the late 1970s, "Ratcatcher" serves up an unforgettably grim housing project that's a living, breathing, biological entity replete with a digestive tract (a nearby canal that swallows a child during the film's grim opening scene) and a recurring bout of gastric distress. Heaps of rotting garbage decompose in the tenement courtyards, threatening to emit noxious clouds of poisonous methane gas while unsupervised, lice-infected kids romp playfully through it all, twirling dead rats by the tail as though they were toy helicopters.

Principle among these urchins is 12-year-old James (William Eadie, in a remarkable debut performance), whose dream in life is for his family -- including a lazy, alcoholic father, a dutiful working mom and two cuddly sisters -- to relocate to a nearby housing development soon to complete

construction. The recurring domestic scenes in "Ratcatcher," which verge on the social-realist kitchen sink drama of Loach and Leigh, are a continuation of themes addressed in Ramsay's 1997 short film "Gasman," in which a divorced father accompanies his restless brood to a joyless holiday function in a neighboring tenement.

Astute at capturing banal working-class domestic rituals in a charming rather than clinical fashion, "Ratcatcher" is at its most enjoyable when it's indoors and not so self-consciously contemplative, contented, instead, simply to deliver life as it's happening: Mom and Sis dancing rambunctiously to Tom Jones, Dad queued up to receive a hero's medal for plucking another drowning tot from the canal, James peeing into a virgin toilet bowl not yet hitched to the wall via plumbing.

Much of the film's visual splendor comes from the astonishing outdoor camera work of Alwin Kuchler, who succeeds in creating a grittily gorgeous ambience out of crumbling housing schemes, festering trash and dead vermin. Kuchler's shots are somber, even pretty at times. He locates natural beauty where you'd least expect to find it, at the bottom of a murky canal, for instance. Rachel Portman's minimalist score never dominates or asphyxiates the film -- it's pleasantly unobtrusive compared to her overblown work in "The Cider House Rules," that melodic over-ebullience that nearly induced vomiting.

"Ratcatcher"'s ensemble cast of marauding tots and groping pre-teens are either cute as though they were carved out of cream cheese or else ripped from an especially austere Dorothea Lange photograph. In one stand-out scene, James' giddy sister Anne-Marie (Lynne Ramsay, Jr.) eats ice cream while perched on a bag of rotting garbage, oblivious to the rot and decay surrounding her. Such is this film's deceptively ambiguous tone: its cloying surface rot can't hide a jubilant heart beating within. In another heart-wresting scene, resident spastic Kenny (John Miller II) performs a seemingly savage act of animal liberation, tying his pet mouse to the string of a helium balloon and setting it aloft, with whimsical, liberating results. But Ramsay's not interested in torturous teens -- that's Harmony Korine's terrain -- she's more attuned to child-like flights of fancy, rendering "Ratcatcher" restrictive in name only.

Doomed, probably, to go without a U.S. distributor due to its elliptical narrative and rough-hewn Glaswegian dialect (the New Directors print arrived with subtitles, mercifully) "Ratcatcher" also seems fated to slip into

the same obscure infamy as "Gummo," another vignette-driven valentine to errant youth mired in vermin and garbage.

"Ratcatcher" may be fraught with contradictions, vague in its own intended message, and in brash defiance of the rules of conventional narrative filmmaking. But it's so lovingly and evocatively rendered that you're willing to take Lynne Ramsay's word for it, whatever the hell she's trying to say about waywardness and working-class life. You come out of "Ratcatcher" liberated in your own right, as though you were Antoine Doinel at the end of "The 400 Blows," scurrying off into that cloudy and elusive distance known as a promising future.

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