

Happy End review - Michael Haneke's satanic soap opera of pure sociopathy

The Austrian director returns to many of his classic themes in a stark, unforgiving and gripping satire on the European bourgeois and the people who serve them



Happy End. Photograph: Films Du Losange

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It hardly needs saying that the adjective in the title is about as accurate as the one in Haneke's *Funny Games*. *Happy End* is a satirical nightmare of haute-bourgeois European prosperity: as stark, brilliant and unforgiving as a halogen light. It is not a new direction for this film-maker, admittedly, but an existing direction pursued with the same dazzling inspiration as ever. It is also as gripping as a satanically inspired soap opera, a dynasty of lost souls.

The movie rehearses almost all of Haneke's classic themes and visual ideas: family dysfunction, inter-generational revenge, the poisonous suppression of guilt and the return of the repressed. There is the horror of death combined with a Thanatos-longing for its deliverance - one line in particular shows how *Happy End* has been inspired by the climactic moment of his previous film, *Amour*.

There is the distinctive preoccupation with surveillance and video recording as technologically unsparing moral reproaches to what we choose not to see in our own behaviour. And Haneke combines this with a new interest in the affectless visual texture of social-media livestreaming, instant messaging, and YouTube supercuts.

Often Haneke's cinema is a cousin to conventional horror, conventional thrillers. Happy End is no exception. It is almost a genre movie. But the genre is that of Haneke's own invention. It is unmistakably his work, presented with his usual masterly compositional flair, a mosaic of horror, filmed by cinematographer Christian Berger in crystal-clear light, often with icily detached long-shot camera positions. One character's face is in fact never shown clearly at all - a diabolically apposite device. The narrative sometimes takes insidious little leaps forward, allowing us to register with a lurch the awful things that have been passed over.

Yet here there is an intriguing new tang of comedy or even grisly farce. The final images of the movie may intend an echo of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, and the unusual presence of a British actor, and the seaside location, made me wonder if Haneke, like Alain Resnais, had conceived an interest in that often underestimated master of middle class horror: Alan Ayckbourn. There is comedy in *Happy End*, of the most glacial sort. One scene shows the entire cast, at a grand family party, listening to a musical performance which - even without what we know about the musician - would be preposterous, reeking with imposture and deceit.

Isabelle Huppert plays Anne Laurent, effectively the chatelaine of a magnificent house and estate in Calais, having taken over the lucrative family construction and transport business from her ageing father Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant). He is suffering from incipient dementia, and is waited on like a dispossessed Shakespearean king by the family's Moroccan servants Rachid (Hassan Ghancy) and Jamila (Nabiha Akkari) - who are periodically subject to racist condescension. Anne herself is getting engaged to the British lawyer handling a new UK deal: Lawrence, played by Toby Jones.

This household is clenched with fear and anxiety. Anne's drunken deadbeat son Pierre (Franz Rogowski), supposedly a site supervisor, has through negligence allowed a catastrophic accident which puts the firm in line for a huge civil suit. Meanwhile, Anne's brother Thomas (Mathieu Kassovitz) has secrets of his own and must now look after the 12-year-old daughter of his previous marriage and accept her into their creepy manorial family-compound.

This is the eerily self-possessed and computer-savvy Ève (Fantine Harduin) whose mother is now terribly ill in hospital with a drug overdose, the cause of which is queasily unclear. And behind all this, the refugees trudge the streets of Calais, waiting to make another attempt at the tunnel.

Of course, with a Haneke movie, we are waiting a final flourish of violence or shock. Inevitably, perhaps, this comes from Huppert. But it is a tiny, almost microscopic incursion, a nasty little assault that perhaps belongs to the schoolyard, in keeping with the register of malign absurdity. And yet when it came, the entire audience in my screening gave a dismayed yelp. And the final images got something between a laugh and a wince. This is a black comedy of pure sociopathy.

This article was amended on 21 May to correct an error in the standfirst regarding the

director's nationality

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