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**Cannes Film Review: ‘Little Joe’**

**Jessica Hausner's artfully unnerving horror movie about a sinister flower is an 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers' for the age of antidepressants.**

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CREDIT: Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

Director:

Jessica Hausner

With:

Emily Beecham, Ben Whishaw, Kit Connor, Kerry Fox, David Wilmot.

Official Site: [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9204204/](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9204204/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)

Just about every horror movie has an opening stretch — it could be 20 minutes, or even the first 45 — that inches along in a creep-out mode of anticipatory anxiety, building to the moment when the demon, the slasher, the monster, the source of the fear factor is revealed. These days, the film will then usually turn into a ride. But even if it doesn’t, the source of the horror always becomes tangible, visible, alive. It takes audacity, and a special skill, to sustain that early mood of premonitory dread over an entire film. And that’s what happens in “[Little Joe](https://variety.com/t/little-joe/),” an artfully unnerving, austerely hypnotic horror movie about a very sinister plant.

Behind the opening credits, the camera hovers, at a skewed high angle, over rows and rows of flower seedlings — hundreds of them — arranged with antiseptic precision in some sort of glassed-in white-on-white tech bunker of a laboratory. It’s hard not to notice that the flowers look a bit phallic, and when viewed in closeup, the bulbs, with a bit of red poking out at the top, suggest Venus flytraps just after they’ve had a munch. Years of horror thrillers have geared us to survey a scene like this one and expect, down the road, the eruption of something ghastly: an alien, perhaps, or monster seed pods like the ones in “[Invasion of the Body Snatchers](https://variety.com/t/invasion-of-the-body-snatchers/).” “[Little Joe](https://variety.com/2019/film/news/jessica-hausner-little-joe-cannes-film-festival-interview-1203219442/)” wants us to be quietly unsettled by those plants. We look at them and wonder: Is this a nursery from hell?

The answer is yes, sort of. “Little Joe,” it turns out, *is* a variation on “[Invasion of the Body Snatchers](https://variety.com/2017/film/news/invasion-of-the-body-snatchers-remake-warner-bros-1202500763/).” But it’s not the umpteenth remake; we hardly need another one of those. Instead, the Austrian filmmaker Jessica Hausner, directing her first English-language feature (and her fourth film to be shown at Cannes), picks up on the proverbial “Body Snatchers” theme — people turned into sinister conformist replicants of themselves — and updates it to our era in a singular and disturbing way.

In “Little Joe,” Hausner works in a shivery and deliberate modernist spook-show style, one that calls up echoes of early David Cronenberg and the Stanley Kubrick of “The Shining.” She holds us in a refined trance, tantalized with fascination at what’s waiting around the corner. Keeping her camera moving with slow-glide voyeurism, she turns those plants into disquieting “creatures” even when they’re just sitting there being their innocent selves.

The high-tech hothouse nursery where much the film is set is part of Planthouse Biotechnologies, a corporate plant-breeding laboratory in England that uses genetic engineering to create profitable new breeds. The seedlings glimpsed in the opening scene are the creation of Alice Woodard (Emily Beecham), a senior plant breeder with the company who has come up with the idea of a flower that gives off a scent so ambrosial it makes people euphoric just to sniff it. The flower she’s invented is pretty, but in a deceptively unspectacular way. It has a brown stem with a slight curve in it that looks like the sort of “designer” lamp you can buy at Target, and the bud opens into a snowball of red tendrils that makes the flower resemble an exotic chrysanthemum. Alice takes one of the plants home, where she lives as a single mom with her son, Joe (Kit Connor), who looks to be about 12. Setting the plant on a table with a light over it, she even names it: She calls the flower — and the entire breed — Little Joe.

The flower’s scent is indeed divine. People take in one smoky burst of that pollen (it happens when the plant spreads its tendrils), and it transforms their mood. They feel happy. But they also feel different. They no longer feel completely like themselves. They look and sound the same, but on some barely perceptible level they don’t act in quite the same way. They’re a bit placid, a bit neutral, a bit in their own zone. They’re no longer engaged — not really — with the outside world. But it doesn’t matter (at least, to them), because the new way they feel is just as good; in fact, it feels better. They want to keep feeling that way. And thanks to the effect of Little Joe, they do.

If this all sounds vaguely familiar, that’s because Hausner, working from a script she co-wrote with Géraldine Bajard, has built “Little Joe” around a daring metaphor. The original “Invasion of the Body Snatchers,” made in 1956, with ordinary buttoned-down citizens being turned into emotionless “pod people,” has sometimes been interpreted as a comment on the McCarthy era, but it was really a sci-fi allegory of the creeping social conformity of the 1950s. The 1978 version updated that same drone-of-conformity idea to the flaked-out weirdness of the post-counterculture ’70s.

“Little Joe” spins it into a startling satirical view of the age of psychopharmacological drugs. The plants in “Little Joe” are nothing more, or less, than a horror-movie version of antidepressants. And in terms of the film’s drama, what’s sinister isn’t just the change in behavior we note in various characters: first Joe, a sweet kid who turns quietly indifferent to his mother, then Chris (Ben Whishaw), Alice’s devoted assistant on the plant project, who’s got a crush on her but then seems to morph into an office drone.

No, the really creepy thing is the loyalty they develop to the plant that’s transformed them. Once they’ve been converted to their new state of weirdly numb contentment, they become fiercely protective of their new way of being; no one is allowed to question it. And that’s the scathing allegorical thrust of “Little Joe.” It presents a landscape of medicated zombies who join in a cult of their own well-being, and who regard their new state as an ideology — not just a way to be but *the* way to be. Symbolically speaking, they’re addicts who don’t know it, hooked on the sinister interior aroma of mood-modification drugs.

Hausner gets pinpoint performances out of her actors, and she needs to, since so much of “Little Joe” pivots around the subtlest of personality shadings. Emily Beecham, who’s like a more vivacious Claire Foy, plays Alice as beaming but increasingly troubled, a scientist who didn’t know she created a monster, and is now desperate to put that genie back in the bottle. Ben Whishaw is super-sly as the benign colleague who becomes a weasel without quite shedding his devotion to Alice. He’s not against her; he just wants her to *join*. David Wilmot is an arresting chameleon — now raging, now snake-oil smooth — as Alice’s office mate Karl, and Kerry Fox is superb as Bella, the mentally fragile Planthouse veteran who’s the first one to detect a shift in personality (in her dog). As for the film’s musical score, by Teiji Ito and Markus Binder, it’s practically another character: an Asian-flavored cacophony of drip drums, flute quavers, and shrieking tech that goes to work on your system.

How you react to “Little Joe” may well hinge on your own beliefs about antidepressants — whether you think they’re an unalloyed force of good, a profit-driven conspiracy by Big Pharma (with the psychiatric establishment as their marketer/enablers), or something in between. But given how little direct criticism of our psychotropic-drug culture you can actually encounter in the media, it may be that a horror movie — albeit a shiveringly delicate and understated art-house one — is the ideal way to present the argument that we’re becoming a society of people too artificially addicted to well-being, regardless of the cost, to see anything outside it.

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Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Competition), May 17, 2019. Running time: **105 MIN.**

**Production**: A Coop99 Filmproduktion, The Bureau, Essential Filmproduktion GmbH production. Producers: Phillipe Bober, Bertrand Faivre, Martin Gschlacht, Jessica Hausner, Geraldine O’Flynn, Bruno Wagner. Executive producers: Vincent Gadelle, Michel Merkt, Marina Perales.

**Crew**: Director: Jessica Hausner. Screenplay: Jessica Hausner, Géraldine Bajard. Camera (color, widescreen): Martin Gschlacht. Editor: Karina Ressler. Music: Teiji Ito, Markus Binder.

**With**: Emily Beecham, Ben Whishaw, Kit Connor, Kerry Fox, David Wilmot.