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'Little Joe': Cannes Review

BY WENDY IDE | 18 MAY 2019

Ben Whishaw, Emily Beecham star in Jessica Hausner's film about a genetically-modified plant



SOURCE: BBC FILMS

'LITTLE JOE'

Dir. Jessica Hausner. Austria, UK, Germany. 2019. 105 mins

Even for someone with as unpredictable a career as Jessica Hausner, *Little Joe* is a departure. A clinically stylised commentary on the hubris of humanity and the commodification of happiness, *Little Joe* tells of a brilliant plant designer who starts to believe that her latest creation, a flower with a scent that makes people happy, is effecting subtle changes on the personalities of those who inhale its pollen.

The performances are pitched a degree or two away from reality

Boldly synthetic in its approach, in everything from colour palette to performance style, this film won't be for everyone. And the fact that it defies easy categorisation might present a marketing challenge. But for those who engage with it, this oddly off-kilter piece of storytelling should exert a pull every bit as mesmerising as any genetically modified mood-enhancing shrub.

Little Joe – the film takes its title from the nickname that Alice (Emily Beecham) gives the flower, in honour of her teenage son Joe (Kit Connor) – is the latest in a long tradition in fiction and film in which man plays God and science crosses a rubicon. It's a genre which has its roots in literature and pulp cinema: *Frankenstein*, *The Day of The Triffids*, *The Fly* and even *Little Shop Of Horrors* contribute DNA to Hausner's creation. But tonally, it's a different creature altogether – cool, glassy, dispassionate.

Alice and her colleague Chris (Ben Whishaw) are facing a certain amount of animosity from some of their colleagues, not least because their scarlet flower is suspected to be the reason for the mass extinction of another experimental plant in the same greenhouse. But nobody can argue with the commercial potential of a plant which requires love and attention – you need to talk to it as well as meticulously control the heat and humidity of its environment – but pays out in a glowing feeling of goodwill. This is commercial science, after all, which dresses up in the cosy mantle of serving mankind, but underneath is motivated by cold, hard cash. The main voice of dissent comes from Bella (Kerry Fox), who blames the plant for changing her beloved dog unrecognisably. But then, Bella has recently recovered from a severe psychological breakdown, so she's not considered to be a reliable witness.

Hausner has always had a knack for getting the most out of her colour choices – Sylvie Testud's defiant red hat in *Lourdes*, for example – and this film is no exception. It's no accident that the red chosen for *Little Joe* is the colour of danger. The green tones she uses for Alice's workplace – mint green for the lab coats, apple for the canteen furniture – have a passing acquaintance with the natural world but are all slightly heightened, the artificiality underscored.

The same is true of the performances. Even before the plant may (or may not) have exerted its influence, the performances are pitched a degree or two away from reality. There's a slightly robotic, declamatory quality – a kind of acting by algorithm – which gives the film an unsettling oddness. It's a technique which works up to a point, although the less experienced actors sometimes have trouble negotiating the treacherous line between mannered acting and bad acting.

The intriguing atmosphere is boosted substantially by the smart use of sound – panicky metallic squeals shred our nerves – and particularly music: angular, jagged pieces written by Japanese composer Teiji Ito in the early 1970s which elegantly complement the striking precision of the cinematography.

Production companies: Coop99, The Bureau, Essential Films

International sales: The Coproduction Office sales@coproductionoffice.eu

Producers: Bruno Wagner, Bertrand Faivre, Philippe Bober, Martin Gschlacht, Jessica Hausner, Gerardine O'Flynn

Screenplay: Jessica Hausner, Géraldine Bajard

Production design: Katharina Wöppermann

Editing: Karina Ressler

Cinematography: Martin Gschlacht

Main cast: Emily Beecham, Ben Whishaw, Kerry Fox, Kit Connor, David Wilmot, Phénix Brossard, Sebastian Hülk, Lindsay Duncan