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'Happy End': Film Review | Cannes 2017

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Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

The Bottom Line

Too little venom; too easy a target.

Michael Haneke's new drama focuses its disapproval on a wealthy French family led by iron matriarch Isabelle Huppert.

After winning the Palme d'Or and the Academy Award for best foreign-language film for his harrowing, heartbreaking study of old age, *Amour*, Michael Haneke returns to Cannes competition five years later with a much milder drama that is likely to divide audiences. *Happy End* leads the viewer by the hand inside the home of a wealthy family of monsters, the Laurents, who have made their fortune with a French construction firm that is now on the rocks. If the story sounds familiar, it's because it's been done many times before, though Haneke's masterful Euro-Gothic touch and a riveting cast headlined by Isabelle Huppert and Jean-Louis Trintignant give it a modernist update and a note of black humor.

Still, there seems to be something missing here.

Even admitting that films like *Cache (Hidden)*, *The White Ribbon* and *Amour* have raised the bar higher and higher, *Happy End* feels like it's pulling its punches and not in their league. For one thing, it's hard to pin down the theme of the piece. Is it the poison of power and money that is passed down from generation to generation? The lack of love or any other type of emotional connection among family members? The virtual enslavement of the servants and the hypocrisy of pretending to care about their welfare, but then not sending their little girl to get rabies shots when she's bitten by the watchdog? The problem is that it's all of the above, a general social malaise involving the upper class, the lower class and the new outcasts — the African migrants stuck in Europe dreaming of a better life. Not by chance is the story set in Calais, home of the infamous migrant Jungle.

Another consideration is that by casting the aged Trintignant as the retired patriarch whose wife has died under the same circumstances as Emmanuelle Riva's character in *Amour*, and adding the fact that his name is Georges and his daughter is played by Isabelle Huppert, Haneke strongly suggests that this is to be read as some kind of sequel to *Amour*. It answers the question about whether Georges died with his wife at the end of

that movie. In this scenario, he didn't but surely wishes he had, considering the family he's forced to live with. His mind is also going, and he's confined to a wheelchair. The singleminded desire of Trintignant's amusingly feisty old-timer is to commit suicide any way he can, whomever he has to involve to do it — be it his barber, migrants on the street or a child.

As in many of the director's films, children are the first victims of adult hypocrisy and soon become perpetrators of evil themselves. Here these dark possibilities remain veiled, just hinted at, and the viewer is left to puzzle out their meaning. The film opens with an unseen child texting someone about the bedtime activities of a woman in the bathroom (mom, perhaps), who is being videotaped as she brushes her teeth, moisturizes her face and so on. The screen is masked by the rectangular display of a cellphone, but both sender and recipient remain hidden. Later one deduces that the person taping must be Eve Laurent (Fantine Harduin), a serious, sad-eyed 13-year-old.

When her mother is taken to the hospital after presumably overdosing on prescription drugs, Eve is sent to live with her dad, Thomas (a perpetually off-balance Mathieu Kassovitz), and his second wife, Anais (Laura Verlinden). The latter closes her eyes to her husband's extracurricular activities, but little Eve soon reads his explicit chats with his lover expressing their "darkest sexual desires" in graphic detail. What disturbs her is not the obscene language, but the idea that he may leave Anais and she'll be sent to a home.

There is also a baby, Paul, who Eve rather disquietingly babysits.

The uncontested leader of the family is the divorced Anne Laurent, one of Huppert's stronger characters, and that's saying a lot. As controller of the family company, she cuts deals with her banker-fiancé Lawrence (Toby Jones in a surprisingly endearing role) while she tries vainly to groom her strapping son Pierre (Franz Rogowski) to take the reins.

Pierre is the one character who never comes into focus. This overgrown son is a total embarrassment and has no aptitude for business. When, in majestic long shot, part of the construction site collapses and seriously injures a worker, he is sent to pay off the man's family. In another long shot, he gets beaten up and staggers off with his tail between his legs. He sweats out his frustrations with his mother by wildly gyrating in a karaoke bar, and has a final star turn at Anne and Lawrence's engagement party.

Little seen and even less heard are the Moroccan live-in servants, Rachid and Jamila (Hassam Ghancy and Nabiha Akkari).

Haneke's dry filming style and geometrically balanced framing are, as always, a great pleasure to watch, creating not just an unsettling atmosphere but revealing hidden meanings, along with Christian Berger's crisp and businesslike lighting, Olivier Radot's stylish set design and editor Monika Willi's near-perfect cutting.

Production companies: Les Films du Losange, X Filme Creative Pool, Wega Film
Cast: Isabelle Huppert, Jean-Louis Trintignant, Mathieu Kassovitz, Fantine Harduin, Franz Rogowski, Laura Verlinden, Toby Jones
Director-screenwriter: Michael Haneke
Producer: Margaret Menegoz
Co-producers: Stefan Arndt, Veit Heiduschka, Michael Katz, Olivier Pere
Director of photography: Christian Berger
Production designer: Olivier Radot
Costume designer: Catherine Leterrier
Editor: Monika Willi
Casting: David El Hakim
World sales: Les Films du Losange
Venue: Cannes Film Festival (Competition)

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