The Rural Noir of One False Move

by David Orr

Big city ennui collides with small town ennui in One False Move, a brazenly violent and tense thriller written by Billy Bob Thornton and his long-time collaborator, Tom Epperson, that builds to a chilling denouement of surprising emotional intensity and depth. The low-budget independent film was directed by Carl Franklin and released theatrically to critical acclaim on May 8, 1992, but took in less than $2 million at the box office, finding more favor with the art house crowd than the general public. A healthy video life coupled with the filmmakers’ continued artistic ascent and professional validation (Thornton with Slings Blade, Franklin with Devil in a Blue Dress) has elevated this gem-in-the-rough to indie cult status.

On the surface, One False Move reflects the dark, cynical aesthetic of noir, be it neo-noir, modern noir, or classic film noir, but beneath the gloom thumps the untamed heart of a Western. High Noon to be exact. Franklin reveals on the film’s DVD commentary, “in a lot of ways One False Move is very much like a Western. The writers intended it to be that way, the ending was described very closely to High Noon. That was the inspiration for them.” Indeed, as the big showdown gets underway, the script (Revised Draft, 9/11/90) reads:

And now we have a SERIES OF SHOTS that should attempt to create the same unbearable, building tension the audience experienced when they saw the final minutes ticking off to high noon for Gary Cooper, or when Alan Ladd was riding to meet Jack Palance at Grafton’s Saloon:

While the writers were thinking Western at the end, they start things off very much in a noir way and the story unfolds as a classic crime thriller, albeit in a fierce ’90s sort of fashion. ThenAmazingly, almost subliminally, what develops is a human drama where the characters are more important than the caper. It is a remarkable, wondrous journey and along the way Arkansas natives Thornton and Epperson flipped film noir inside out to create a sort of rural noir, yet another hybrid in the ever-expanding noir canon.

LILA

Listen to the whip-poor-will. You know what they say about when you hear a whip-poor-will? It means somebody’s gonna die.

The screenplay (unlike the movie) opens with a restless man drinking a beer on the front porch of his house. A title tells us we’re in Star City, Arkansas, on a Saturday night. The “big, handsome man” sits alone with his empty thoughts, uninterested in the “glittery starry sky” above him.

We dissolve to another “glittering sea of lights” and a title tells us: “Los Angeles.” We meet a beautiful black woman named Fantasia who leads her white-trash boyfriend Ray and his black, drug-dealing partner Pluto into an unsuspecting home and, in no time at all, Ray and Pluto terrorize and murder six people for a large sum of drugs and money. Right from the start, the writers hold nothing back. The violence is front and center, swift and cold, and delivered with the deft, disturbing touch of an artist.

CLOSE-UP OF PLUTO’S FACE as he begins to stab Danielle. We hear DANIELLE’S MUFFLED MOANS AND SQUEALS -- each time the knife strikes home, Pluto emits a short violent breath -- at the fourth or fifth breath, blood suddenly splatters his glasses.

In Arkansas, the restless man on the porch resists the calls from his wife to come inside to bed. She lets him know that she’s “tired of goin’ to bed alone.” Meanwhile back in LA, Fantasia discovers a young boy, the son of a victim, hiding in the closet:

There is the beautiful scene in THE YEARLING when the concealing forest greenery is parted by the little boy, to reveal the tiny hiding orphaned fawn. This moment, as Fantasia opens the door of the closet, is similar, except it is one of horror instead of beauty, as Fan-
tasia now looks into the eyes of the wide-eyed and shaking CHILD.

At the same time back in the South, the restless man’s daughter awakens from a bad dream “whispering and crying.” As his wife comforts their daughter inside, the man stares out at the dark night with a “faintly troubled face.” His name is Dale Dixon.

As Los Angeles detectives investigate the bloody crime scenes, we learn that Fantasia let the little boy get away and that the bad guys are headed to Star City. It isn’t long before a couple of hard-boiled city detectives, Dud Cole and John McFeely, figure out the Star City in question is a sleepy Ozark town deep in the heart of Arkansas. They put a call in to the local sheriff and what do you know, it happens to be the restless Dale Dixon, who’s ready for some real action to come his way; in fact he can hardly contain his homespun golly-gee glee. Dud and McFeely fly out to Star City and set up camp with Sheriff Dixon, as Fantasia, Ray, and Pluto continue their murderous rampage across the country, Fantasia getting into the act when she shoots a state trooper in Texas.

In Star City, Dixon proves to be a man of boundless energy and enthusiasm, so much so that the locals fondly call him Hurricane. Hurricane takes a liking to the big city boys and confesses to Dud that he’d like to come out to Los Angeles and sign up for the “big time.” Later, Dud tells McFeely over lunch:

DUD
Tremendous fella.

Hurricane enters, totting his police radio. The booth Dud and McFeely are sitting at is just around the corner from the entrance and the cashier’s station, and thus Dud and McFeely don’t see Hurricane come in. As he passes the cashier’s station Hurricane looks into the glass case which is filled with candy bars. Fern being nowhere in sight, Hurricane goes behind the counter and helps himself to a candy bar.

DUD
You know what he told me this morning?

MC FEELY
What?

DUD
He said he was thinking about moving out to L.A. and joining the police department.

MC FEELY
(with a disbeliefing guffaw)
You’re kidding.

ANGLE ON HURRICANE, behind the counter unwrapping his candy bar, and now suddenly hearing himself being discussed.

DUD
Honest to God. He said he thought you and I and he’d make a hell of a team.

MC FEELY
(laughing louder)
Oh shit—

DUD
(imitating Hurricane’s voice)
You gonna pay fer it fer a change?

MC FEELY
(laughing still louder)
I was just gettin’ me a candy bar, Fern.

FERN
You wanna pay fer it fer a change?

HURRICANE
(getting some change out of his pocket)
Sure, Fern.

And now Hurricane walks on around to
Dud and McFeely's booth. It's a moment of agonizing discomfort for everybody.

HURRICANE
(dispersedly, but without rancor)
Hi, boys. Saw your car parked out front.

Dud and McFeely look as thought if they had the power to change into a liquid and dribble through the cracks in the floor, they would immediately do so. After a long pause:

DUD
Dale, we, uh--

HURRICANE
Dud-- I want to apologize for runnin' off at the mouth like I did this mornin'. I guess I kind of put you on the spot.

MC FEELY
Listen, Dale, we didn't mean that--

Hurricane's police radio lets loose a few squawks.

And before anyone can blink Hurricane charges out of the door like a whirlwind. This sheriff truly is a "tremendous fella."

Hurricane soon discovers that Fantasia is a local girl named Lila Walker who took off for Hollywood a few years back to become a movie star. He tells Dud and McFeely that he knows Lila. When she was seventeen he helped her out when she got into some shoplifting trouble. Hurricane just can't believe Lila would kill anyone; after all, she didn't bring any harm to that little boy in Los Angeles. McFeely warns him, "that don't prove shit."

Stopping in Houston, Pluto has arranged a sale for their dope, but Fantasia can't wait to get home so Ray puts her on a bus and she goes on ahead without them.

From the very start, the tension steadily grows as these two converging storylines intercut each other, alternating from one to the other with a subtle grace that is as palpable as it is seductive. The script is character-driven to the core and yet the momentum never sags, never lingers too long on any one moment. As the stories intertwine, our attachment deepens. The more we know, the more we care.

Hurricane, Dud, and McFeely pay a visit to Mrs. Davis, Lila's mother. In a flood of tears, she can't believe her ears. Mrs. Davis swears to Hurricane that she hasn't spoken to Lila since the previous summer and believes "they musta kidnapped her, brainwashed her..." Lila's eighteen-year-old brother, Ronnie, sits quietly off to the side.

HURRICANE
(turning to the young black man)
Ronnie, you heard from your sister?

RONNIE
No sir.

HURRICANE
Would you tell us if you did?

RONNIE
Yes sir.

VOICE
I'm hungry.

Everyone looks toward the source of the voice. A LITTLE KID of about five has come out of a back room. He's an extremely good-looking kid, with light, café au lait skin, brown hair, and whatever color eyes Hurricane has, the kid's eyes are that color.

MRS. DAVIS
Byron, don't bother us, honey.

HURRICANE
is staring at the kid.

MRS. DAVIS
Who's that?

HURRICANE
(taking him and hugging him, comforting him)
And he's a pretty boy too.

The little boy stares out of this grandmother's embrace at Hurricane. Hurricane has a look on his face that can best be described as thunderstruck.

It now makes perfect sense to Dud and McFeely, the killers are headed their way so Lila can see her son. Hurricane is strangely troubled by this. Later, he jumps down McFeely's throat when McFeely suggests Hurricane knows more about Lila than he's telling. McFeely apologizes, telling Hurricane he was only joking.

Back in Houston, Ray and Pluto kill the hapless dealers when the deal goes sour and then quickly return to the road. Pluto thinks maybe they should forget about picking up Fantasia and head straight for Chicago. Ray tells him a little secret, Fantasia took their stash of cash as insurance. They have to go get Fantasia. Pluto isn't pleased.

Meanwhile, a bus drops off Fantasia in the middle of nowhere. A car arrives shortly after. Fantasia hops in and gives her brother Ronnie a big hug. Ronnie cautions her against coming home. He tells her that Sheriff Dixon stopped by with some California cops. Fantasia begs him to let her see Byron, her little boy. Ronnie agrees to hide her out in an empty house he knows about and promises to bring Byron to her.

Hurricane goes out that night without Ray and McFeely. He drives out to Lila's mother's house and parks in the shadows. Hours later, Hurricane watches as Ronnie slips out of the house to bring Byron to Lila. Hurricane then waits for Ronnie and the boy to leave before making his move.

INT. KITCHEN IN THE HOUSE - A FEW MINUTES LATER - NIGHT

57 CREATIVE SCREENWRITING
Lila is standing at the sink, washing some dishes.

REVERSE ANGLE: Over Lila’s shoulder, we see Hurricane quietly enter. His gun is out. He stares at Lila for a long moment—then:

HURRICANE

Lila!

Lila turns. For a moment, there’s no expression on her face—no surprise, no fear, no anything, just a neutral registering of what’s in front of her—and then a smile appears.

HURRICANE

Lila follows Hurricane’s instructions with an air of faint amusement.

LILA

Simon says?

As Hurricane questions her about Ray and Pluto, Lila drolly mocks his every move. Hurricane maintains his law enforcement face, but Lila knows him too well. Hurricane picks up the phone:

HURRICANE

I just don’t have the legal authority—

LILA

You didn’t have the legal authority to fuck me when I was seventeen but that didn’t stop you then!

Hurricane’s finger stops in mid-dial.

LILA

You gonna pretend you didn’t see that little boy? What’s the matter? Why don’t you say something? Do you hate it that much that a kid of yours has nigger blood?

HURRICANE

He’s not my kid—

LILA

“Not your”—? He’s nearly as white as you are—

HURRICANE

That don’t prove anything—

This startling revelation is the defining moment of the story and it resonates with truth and utter humanity. The connection is crystal clear and it tears us up inside. We start to care more for the killer than the cop, feeling empathy and contempt for both.

Hurricane refuses to accept that the boy is his, but the guilt eats away at him as he and Lila wait for Ray and Pluto to show up. By morning, he tells Lila he’ll give her mother some money, but Lila doesn’t want his money. She wants him to stand up and be a real father for the boy. At this point, she’s the one talking sense—or is she playing Hurricane, conning him? Hurricane isn’t sure, and neither are we. Ray finally calls and Lila keeps her cool, giving him directions to the house. They’ll be there in a few minutes. As Hurricane readies for their arrival, he promises to Lila that if she helps him he’ll let her go.

At the same time, Dud and McFeely have learned that Byron and Ronnie were out late last night. They pick up Byron, and off they go with the little boy leading the way.

This is where the _High Noon_ reference fits in, and the pressure rapidly increases, though never
out of control, until it finally explodes into a wild, chaotic confrontation. Lila does her part, luring Ray and Pluto into the house. Hurricane surprises them with his gun drawn, but in a flash Pluto stabs a knife in his ribs. Hurricane shoots Pluto in the chest as Ray bolts out the door. Hurricane stumbles after him onto the porch and takes aim, Lila rushes out and grabs him:

Hurricane’s shot goes wide and Ray turns and fires a shot at Hurricane. The back of Lila’s head erupts in a sudden crimson flowering, and she drops at Hurricane’s feet. Ray fires again, and the bullet hits Hurricane near his left shoulder under the collar bone.

Hurricane manages to squeeze off three quick shots. Each one strikes home in Ray’s body. Ray twists and jerks and falls and groans and dies.

And now, except for the SOFT SOUNDS OF WIND AND BIRDS, all is silence in the little clearing in the woods. Hurricane looks from the body of Ray to the body of Lila, at his feet.

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Byron.

HURRICANE

(weakly)

You— not quite—

BYRON

Where’s the lady at?

HURRICANE

Over yonder—

Byron begins to move away, but Hurricane reaches up and grabs his arm.

HURRICANE

(urgently)

No— stay here with me—

Byron looks back down at Hurricane.

HURRICANE

(more softly)

Stay here with me—

And now the boy drops down on his knees by Hurricane, and Hurricane takes his hand.

The dappled sunlight plays on the man and his son as they look at each other...

FADE OUT.

Sometimes, the quietest moments sing loudest in our hearts.

“The writers did a great job, creating a genre piece that becomes a character piece,” declares Franklin, adding, “It’s the mixture of the unorthodox style with the classic structure that makes One False Move, the screenplay, such a great screenplay.” It’s hard to disagree with his assessment. Thornton and Epperson elevate what could have been a standard-issue crime story into something extraordinary, very deliberately leading the genre of film noir by the hand, out of the city, and into the country, where the rough-hews of the Western comfortably reside.

The writing has a relaxed style, personal and affecting. The dialogue fits like your favorite pair of jeans. It’s no wonder the actors in the film, especially Bill Paxton as Hurricane Dixon, were so superb. If it ain’t on the page, it ain’t on the stage, as they say. It’s fresh to see the arrogance and elitism of urban existence used as a foil to herald the uncomplicated, naive small-town world. The chasm seems wide at the start and contemporary realism clashes with deep-rooted romanticism. Yet, before long we understand each offering something for the other and each shares the same destiny.

Vaguely nihilistic and difficult to define in thematic terms, film noir marches to the fatalistic beat of impending doom. One False Move treads lightly through similar shadows, then cuts a path of its own, moving out into the light. It’s about truth and how in the end it will find you. It’s also about atonement and how ambition can lead to destruction. It’s about the potential and the pitfalls within us all. It’s about the untested potency simple things possess and the sweetness borne unto them. Let it be said that rural noir has much more on its mind than expressive hints of contemptuous hues. More than meets the eye. There’s a clearing in the deep, dark woods where the eternal winds of optimism blow. If you push through the thicket, you’ll find it.

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**ONE FALSE MOVE**

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