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By MICHAEL LAM

Salvatore Samperi's Ernesto is not a bad film at all, yet it is difficult to imagine anyone ever admitting to have liked it. Its main character — a reactionary and a user — is such an obnoxious, nasty and rottenly-spoiled brat, one would welcome the opportunity to strangle him at any given time.

This might sound like a very unprofessional way to start a review — it probably is. But except for extreme intellectuals, most of us, viewers and reviewers alike, approach movies with our hearts more than our minds. We rely on our gut reactions. "Did you like it?" is asked more often than "Was it good?"

### HATEFUL

It is always easier to like a mediocre movie whose characters we are fond of than a better-crafted film with a mean and hateful central character.

Tootsie's success is not a reflection of the film's overall quality, but a confirmation of the likeability of the titled character portrayed by Dustin Hoffman. One is overwhelmed by the cuteness and the gutsiness of Dorothy, and somehow, the fondness transfers onto the film. Thus Tootsie — not only Hoffman and not only Dorothy — is "good" and "likable."

What looks like the confusion of the audience is actually a logical reaction to a certain type of film. Tootsie is good because Dorothy is good, and Dorothy is Tootsie. Movies like Tootsie invite the audience to get involved in their characters' lives. Their successes depend on it.

Ernesto does not particularly ask for the audience's participation, but small films nevertheless do have the tendency of drawing us into them. It is like being caught in a tiny room with a stranger — not to strike up a conversation would be considered impolite.

### SEXUALITY

Played by pretty-faced Martin Halm, Ernesto is a cruel and heartless young man who uses his sexuality, among other things, to fulfill his personal needs. He does not seem to possess the ability to feel. Coolly and firmly, and without a trace of concern or care, he puts the people around him in pain and misery.

One of his victims is a young worker with whom he is carrying on a homosexual relationship. At first sight, Ernesto appears to be a curious innocent, eager to explore the possibilities that life offers. Soon, though, it becomes obvious that what he has in mind has more to do with exploiting than with exploring.

Samperi's uncertain handling of Ernesto's personality, at least in the beginning, leads us to expect a film about the coming of age and coming out, and it turns out that both of these are false alarms. It is the major flaw of the film — and pretty major at that.

Ernesto is playing at the Lumiere.