

Document Citation

Title	Alexandra's project
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	2003 Mar 03
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	49
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Alexandra's project, de Heer, Rolf, 2003



VIDEO VENOM: *Helen Buday is a woman who records a nasty present for the husband she hates in Rolf de Heer's "Alexandra's Project."*

ALEXANDRA'S PROJECT

(AUSTRALIA)

A Palace Films release (in Australia) of a Fandango Australia-Palace Films presentation of a Vertigo production, with the assistance of the South Australian Film Corp. and support of the Australian Film Commission. (International sales, Exception Films, Paris.) Produced by Julie Ryan, Domenico Procacci, Rolf de Heer. Executive producer, Antonio Zeccola. Co-producers, Sue Murray, Bryce Menzies.

Directed, written by Rolf de Heer. Camera (Atlab color, widescreen), Ian Jones; editor, Tania Nehme; music, Graham Tardif; production designers, Ian Jobson, Phil Macpherson; sound (Dolby digital), James Currie; casting, Audine Leith. Reviewed at Frank Hurley screening room, Fox Studios, Sydney, Jan. 28, 2003. (In Berlin Film Festival, competing.) Running time: 103 MINS.

Steve Gary Sweet
Alexandra Helen Buday
Bill Bogdan Koca

By DAVID STRATTON

Variety, Mar. 3-9, 2003, p. 49
A wife with a grievance takes revenge on her husband in "Alexandra's Project," a grim examination of the human condition from Aussie auteur Rolf de Heer. Moving from the expansive outdoor vistas of his last film, "The Tracker," to the claustrophobic interiors of an "average" suburban house, de Heer again demonstrates his skills as he relentlessly depicts the screws turning on the hapless protagonist as his avenging wife punishes and humiliates him. However, the punishment seems out of all proportion to the "crimes" committed, so that the film becomes no simplistic pro-feminist tract but is, on the contrary, more complex and disturbing. There will be lively pros and cons as a result, which might engender the kind of controversy the film needs to find a niche in art-houses, while its Berlin fest competition slot will only be the first of future fest unspoolings.

Ian Jones' widescreen camera prowls suburban streets, and comes to rest on the home of Steve (Gary Sweet), Alexandra (Helen Buday) and their two children. It's early on the morning of Steve's birthday, and, though he seems oblivious to

the tensions in the air, he's obviously in for a rough time. As the family goes through the morning routine, signs of unease appear. Against his family's wishes, Steve is a secret smoker, and he won't let Alexandra have money of her own or pay the bills, which obviously annoys her.

After Steve has gone to work, complaining about Bill (Bogdan Koca), the next-door neighbor, who has provided the house with security locks and blinds, Alexandra sends the children away and makes her preparations. At the office, where Steve works as a manager, he is given a birthday cake and a raise, so he returns home in good spirits.

And then his nightmare begins. There's no sign of his family, and his present is a videotape. As he watches it, beer in hand, he sees Alexandra, telling him how unhappy she is. When she begins to strip for the camera, he reacts with a mixture of amazement and revulsion. Naked, she produces a gun which she aims at her own head, threatening suicide. She then reveals she has cancer in both breasts.

This is only the start of the mind games and mental torture she imposes on the man she now obviously hates. The video camera reveals another man, the neighbor, with her; and Steve finds himself locked in his own house, the locks changed, escape denied him as the tape inexorably continues with more horrifying revelations, which take on an unusually sour edge that will unsettle and may even anger audiences as things progress.

De Heer's concept is an ingenious one, and his two principal actors are superb. Sweet, last seen as the brutal cop in "The Tracker," reveals a very wide range of conflicting emotions as he's forced to assess his life and the wrongs she believes he has done to her, while Buday, in a bold performance, bares her body and soul to the relentless camera as she extracts an extremely savage revenge.

The camera prowls around the house throughout, while the film's sound design is another creative element in a technically highly accomplished pic, which is the first production from Italo company Fandango's Aussie offshoot.