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# Desperate Measures

**W**hite-water time: The holidays are upon us and the studio floodgates are open. You can try panning for gold (or even silver) in the new-release deluge, but keep an eye open for those nuggets that could be washed away in the hype for *Prince of Egypt* or *You've Got Mail*.

Take, for example, the innocuously titled *A Simple Plan* (its opening now pushed back to December 11). Compared to the fool's gold of a botched botched-caper flick like *Very Bad Things*, Sam Raimi's *A Simple Plan* is the real stuff—a relatively unselfconscious and attitude-free paragon of all-American B-movie virtue. Set in a small town refrigerated by the Minnesota winter (yet more likely to sprout palm trees than to ever see full employment), *A Simple Plan* will remind some people of *Fargo*. But, as Raimi fans know, this hardcore genre filmmaker is both more elemental in his comedy and gothic in his moral imagination than his erstwhile buddies, the Coens.

As straightforward in narrative as it is gut-wrenching in effect, *A Simple Plan* is a sort of slow-motion skid down an icy blacktop—it's a movie you watch with a mounting sense of dread. The well-behaved, uptight working stiff Hank (Bill Paxton) is trapped into a fateful alliance with his dim-witted big brother Jacob (Billy Bob Thornton) and Jacob's equally feckless, marginally less idiotic friend (Brent Briscoe) when, through a series of weird coincidences, the three guys stumble upon a small plane that has crashed in the woods, leaving a corpse and a suitcase stuffed with cash.

Greed is the word. As the casting reunites the two male principals of Carl Franklin's similarly character-driven and comparably all-business sleeper, *One False Move*, so the situation soon comes to suggest a Three Stooges *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. The nominal brains of the trio, Hank is saddled with the problem of controlling two blabbermouth, mistrustful trolls and \$4 million—not to mention his very pregnant wife (Bridget Fonda), who, if not instantly corrupted by the sight of the money, all but dons the green eyeshade to recalibrate her future.

*A Simple Plan* proceeds from one blunder to the next, until the increasingly paranoid principals have managed to dig themselves into a hole deeper than Bill Gates's pockets. "Nobody would ever believe you'd be capable of doing what you've done," one character tells another. Everyone is flailing on thin ice and, as with all good rundra noirs, the situation is addition-

*A Simple Plan*  
Directed by Sam Raimi  
Written by Scott B. Smith from his novel  
A Paramount release  
Opens December 11

*Shattered Image*  
Directed by Raul Ruiz  
Written by Duane Poole  
A Lions Gate release  
Opens December 4

*Invisible Adversaries*  
A film by Valie Export  
At Millennium, December 4

BY J. HOBERMAN

ute to Raimi's single-minded vision that his movie's choked-up ending is as stark in its moral schemata as anything produced in the heyday of silent-movie German Expressionism.

**RAUL RUIZ IS SAID** to have directed a hundred films but *Shattered Image* is only the third one to be made in English. This is hardly the madly prolific, go-for-baroque Chilean exile's greatest movie, but it's one destined for a large (and largely unsuspecting) viewership; part of the movie's pleasure is imagin-

*Shattered Image* is an enjoyably cheap and mildly lurid thriller that might have been scripted in an afternoon by Alain Robbe-Grillet, solicited with cash and the promise of a long weekend in Runaway Bay. (In fact, the movie is the first to be written by Duane Poole, whose copious TV credits include producing *The Love Boat*.) The movie is beautifully shot by Robby Müller but there's an intentionally schlocky aspect to the production that suggests a second-generation *To Catch a Thief* rip-off; it has the spirit, if not the style, of the Mexican potboilers that Luis Buñuel used to subvert in the 1950s.

Given this almost normal facade, *Shattered Image* thrives even more than most Ruiz films on peculiar touches and baffling behavior. The two stars struggle through their dialogue as though dubbed into English (particularly Baldwin) and Ruiz further ups the entertainment quotient with his trademark off-kilter compositions. Suave rack-focus shots allow the schizo heroine to ponder her reflection on a razor blade even as the kitschy mise-en-scène keeps changing the painting in her hotel room.

With the revelation that each Jessie has suffered a traumatic rape, the dreams begin getting mixed up. Seattle Jessie seems to fall in love while Jamaica Jessie shows an unexpected flair for self-protective mayhem. In one dream, some guy's trying to kill her; in the other, she has to kill him.

But don't expect a resolution to this Möbius striptease. Rather than build toward the usual Ruiz bloodbath, *Shattered Image* chases its tail to come full circle.

**SPEAKING OF PARANOIAC** B movies, *Invisible Adversaries*—the chef d'oeuvre of the Vienna-based mixed-media artist Valie Export—is having a rare local screening Friday at Millennium. One of the richest avant-garde features of the 1970s, this unpredictable, messy film is a feminist reworking of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. There are times when Export's rambunctious idea-fest all but collapses under the weight of its assembled gags, digressions, and visual bits of business. But, in the end, it prevails with a winning combination of sexual frankness and visual wit.

Some 20 years ago, *Invisible Adversaries* precipitated something of a scandal in its hometown—less for its nudity and erotic interludes than for its truculent denunciations of the Austrian film industry, the pretentious hodgepodge of Viennese architecture, and the hypocrisy of the local burghers: "Vienna's history is oblivion and treason."



Cold sweat: Paxton and Thornton in *A Simple Plan*

ally complicated by the fact that it's darned nearly impossible to cover your tracks in the snow.

Raimi puts over this cautionary tale with a few Hitchcockian flourishes and some others that might have been dreamt up in the Middle Ages. Most of the movie's special effects involve the animal kingdom—the crows that circle around the plane wreck, the fox that causes a truck to skid off the road and later visits the henhouse. *A Simple Plan* goes reliably over the top with one domestic bloodbath—perhaps the only scene more alarming than the ongoing spectacle of Thornton, grinning (or grimacing) like a jack-o'-lantern around a prosthetic overbite and beneath a coiffure that, except for its burnt sienna hue, resembles one of Andy Warhol's old wigs.

*A Simple Plan* is both an extremely credible thriller and an affecting brother-story. As even an apparently "victimless" crime begins to exact its inevitable toll, conjugal love gives way to furious disappointment, small-town coziness turns horribly claustrophobic, security dissolves into desperation, and family ties knot themselves into a noose. It's a trib-

ing an entire multiplex audience looking around at each other and wondering, "What the fuck?"

*Shattered Image* begins as a sort of belated sequel to the French punk actioner *La Femme Nikita*. A glamorous assassin named Jessie (the now somewhat haggard Anne Parillaud) whacks a business dude in the men's room of a fashionable Seattle bistro, then goes home to sleep it off—dreaming that she is a timorous newlywed Jessie en route to Jamaica with her solicitous husband Brian (William Baldwin) and somewhat nervous because it seems that she's been having this serial dream that she's some kind of ruthlessly hard-boiled hit chick living in Seattle.

There you have it: Parallel action; parallel lives, particularly as "Seattle Jessie" soon meets her very own equally attentive Brian. Each Jessie has the other Jessie as her nocturnal alter ego and both dreams are presented in installment cliff-hangers, sometimes literally. Repressed "Jamaica Jessie" dreams of having anonymous sex in public places, while man-hating Seattle Jessie dreams of being thrillingly rescued in a romantic location by her new husband.