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Author(s)	Derek Elley
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OUR MUSIC

VARIETY (NOTRE MUSIQUE)

P. 36 (FRANCE-SWITZERLAND)

A Films du Losange release (in France) of an Avventura Films, Peripheria, France 3 Cinema, Canal Plus (France)/Vega Film, TSR, DFI (Switzerland) production. (International sales: Wild Bunch, Paris.) Produced by Alain Sarde, Ruth Waldburger.

Directed, written by Jean-Luc Godard. Artistic director, Anne-Marie Mieville. Camera (color), Julien Hirsch, Jean-Christophe Beauvallet; music, extracts from works by Jean Sibelius, Alexander Knaifel, Hans Otte, Ketil Bjornstad, Meredith Monk, Komitas, Gyorgy Kurtag, Valentin Silvestrov, Peter Tchaikovsky, Trygve Seim, Arvo Part, Anouar Brahem, David Darling; sound (Dolby SRD), Francois Musy, Pierre Andre, Gabriel Hafner. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (non-competing), May 16, 2004. Running time: 79 MIN.

With: Sarah Adler, Nade Dieu, Jean-Luc Godard, Rony Kramer, Georges Aguilar, Leticia Gutierrez, Ferlyn Brass, Simon Eine, Jean-Christophe Bouvet, Elma Dzanic, Juan Goytisolo, Mahmoud Darwich, Jean-Paul Curnier, Pierre Bergounioux, Gilles Pecqueux.

(French, English, Spanish dialogue)

By DEREK ELLEY

Our Music," from veteran provocateur Jean-Luc Godard, is rigorously shot, but with an interior mellowness that's far from the scatter-gun, guerrilla mentality of even his last movie, "In Praise of Love" (2001). Pic is a philosophical meditation on man's inability to reconcile the contrary forces in his makeup — here, seen through the savagery and pointlessness of war. Recognizably Godard with its playfulness and wordplay,



WAR IS HELL: *Helmer Jean-Luc Godard's "Our Music," starring Sarah Adler, takes an unsympathetic look at global conflicts and man's contrary behaviors.*

but deeply human at the same time, this won't go any further commercially than his recent works, but will delight upscale viewers in festivals and other niche situations.

At 73, the French-born Swiss filmmaker ranks as one of the few of his generation with a cohesive moral position tied to a stubborn love of cinema — and, more importantly, fresh ways of conveying both. Essentially elegiac in flavor, film carries an emotional power in its final stages that is all the more moving for its simplicity.

Divided into three sections, but with the first and third essentially brief bookends, pic starts (“Kingdom 1: Hell”) with a montage of clips from movies and documentaries showing war, political conflict and genocide across the ages. In the choice of rapid extracts, Godard the film buff rubs shoulders with Godard the Euro thinker, while a female voiceover notes: “And so, after the Flood, there appeared on Earth men equipped for extermination,” finally opining, “It’s amazing that anyone’s survived.”

Content of the clips becomes more reflective as it switches to religious imagery, providing a neat segue to present-day Sarajevo, where the main hourlong seg of the movie (“Kingdom 2: Purgatory”) is set.

Godard, playing himself, is among the guests at a series of European Literary Encounters taking place in the once-ravaged city. Mixing other real writers and thinkers with fictional characters, section immediately uses Godardian word games and declamations as soon as the guests are ferried into town in taxis.

At a swanky reception at the French ambassador’s residence, one journalist points out that writers have no direct experience of what they opine about, while those who actually shape history don’t have the time to consider their actions. With that line of defense laid out, Godard is ready for the main course.

Film’s chief protag is the fictional Olga Lerner (Sarah Adler), a French-Jewish journo currently based in Israel, who’s the ambassador’s granddaughter. Her reason for coming to cover the event is “Palestine. And because I live in Tel Aviv. I hope to see a place where reconciliation seems possible.”

One of her key interviews is with Palestinian writer Mahmoud Darwish, who sets the ball rolling by noting that Palestinians also have something to be grateful for in their greatest enemy. “Israel has made Palestine famous. Though we realize that people are interested in you, not us.”

Also floating around are Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo, who talks in abstract symbols, and some Native Americans who can’t understand why some people have been so intent on their extermination. Weaving in and out of all this, Godard himself provides the key to the argument: that dualities, opposites and confrontation are at the base of everything — “our music.”

During the middle section, film threatens to become yet another unedifying spectacle of European intellectuals getting their rocks off on a Balkan tragedy. Olga, especially, seems a typically Godardian fabrication from the ’60s, a contrary idealist who exists in a universe of absolutes, and for whom some kind of suicide seems the only means of expression.

However, in the final reels, the pic

slips into its coda (“Kingdom 3: Heaven”). Godard ramps up the emotional element, as news about Olga filters back, and the pic ends in an idyllic, summery setting, ironically guarded by U.S. Marines.

Using a wide variety of musical extracts, from the lushness of Tchaikovsky’s “Manfred” symphony to sparer doodles by Arva Part, pic is finely crafted at every level, with a defiant use of sharp 35mm lensing of autumnal and wintry Sarajevo.

One of the most moving moments, which will strike a chord in every film buff’s heart, is when Godard is asked by a student, “Can the new little digital cameras save the cinema?” Once upon a time, the feisty helmer would have responded with machine-gun intellectual vigor. This time, he simply looks at the camera and slowly, sadly, rolls his eyes.