

## 'Memory of a Killer' is greater than the sum of its parts

MORTON MARCUS - SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT  
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If You Go

WHAT: 'The Memory of A Killer.'

RATING: R for violence, sexuality and nudity.

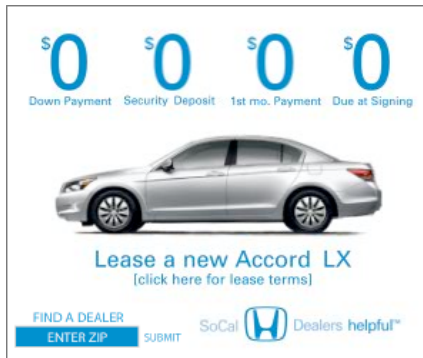
WHERE: Nickelodeon, 426-7500.

LENGTH: 2 hours.

VERDICT: B+.


By MORTON MARCUS SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

How do you categorize a film like "The Memory of a Killer" that's got all this — plot, pacing, acting, original film technique and a great gimmick? Is it a thriller, police procedural, film noir, crime film? It's all of those but much more, and therein lies the problem with this a taut, edge-of-the-seat drama that moves like a shotgun blast.



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You see, the police procedural/thriller/noir/crime aspect of the film is exciting but standard, yet the film isn't standard in the least and seems more than those adjectives describe.

What kind of film is it then?

An aging hit man is sent on assignment to do a double homicide in Antwerp, Belgium. The first killing goes as planned, and the viewer sees how vicious the hit man can be. But when the hit man comes face-to-face with his second victim, he registers shock and refuses to complete the contract. By this time, the viewer has learned the film's gimmick: This is no ordinary aging contract killer, but a man in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease.

For the rest of the film, the hit man and two hot-shot cops on his trail unravel a complex web of deceit that leads to the evil-doers who ordered the original hits, with the hit man and the cops playing a cat and mouse game with each other as their separate routes close in on the bad guys.

All well and good, all very exciting, all handled with consummate skill by director Erik Van Looy, but that's not what makes "The Memory of a Killer" memorable, nor does it warrant this critic's search for a special category in which to place the film. What does is the acting of the hit man and the lead cop.

Jan Declair is Angelo Ledda, the hit man. He was last seen on these shores as the stern old father in "Karakter," the Academy Award winner for Best Foreign Film in 1998. In "Memory" his every move, every facial twitch is mesmerizing. So is the placid, handsome features of Karen De Bouw as Vincke, the thoughtful cop.

What is so memorable about Declair and De Bouw's acting is that their characterizations are not in the script. In fact, we hardly know anything about either character except for the skimpiest of background information.

"The Memory of a Killer" is that rare film where two actors, through their screen presences, take a film where few films have gone before, especially Declair, who summons up memories of Jean Gabin, Eddie Constantine, Max von Sydow, Gerard Depardieu and other roughhewn iconic middle-age actors of European cinema.

To his credit, director van Looy trains his camera on Declair's face, as if he knows where his film's strength lies. He does the same with De Bouw, whose calm intensity reflects the probing nature of an investigator seeking as much to understand his quarry as to bring him to justice. It's not too farfetched to see in both men a reflection of Dostoyevsky's killer and investigator in "Crime and Punishment."

Declair and De Bouw raise a film which would be a satisfying entertainment into a fascinating character study that at the same time is a stunning example of how actors can transcend their material.

They elevate a commercial thriller to a thought-provoking work of art. So provocative is Declair's performance that the viewer finds himself confronting thoughts about the very nature of evil, wondering whether a vicious killer personifies evil or is merely a man who made the wrong choice because of a series of incidents in his early life.

As Declair's intense performance makes clear, Angelo Ledda, the immoral hit man, is guided by a moral code that is more clear-cut than any of the film's other characters, except possibly De Bouw's.

The transcendence of the two actors into almost archetypal characters is a fascinating event to watch, and it is well worth any film-goer's price of admission to spend two hours in the dark with such men.

Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program "Cinema Scene" on Community Television of Santa Cruz County at 8:30 p.m. Thursday and Sunday.

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