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## **'Tuvalu' Beautifully Rejects Hollywood Norm**

In an industry dominated by a conservative Hollywood that prefers not to take any chances, you can't help but be thankful for the independent film industry that, with striking regularity, will jump at any opportunity to be different. Some do it out of necessity, others do it for the art. *Tuvalu* very clearly does it for the latter, and does it very, very well. Shattering the mold of modern Hollywood cinema, *Tuvalu* rejects everything we've come to expect from our movie-going experience, while embracing the roots of a film style that existed 75 years ago.

The most striking part is the fact that, other than the characters' names, there are only a handful of words spoken throughout the film. This is obviously paying homage to the silent film stars of the 1920s. Most notably, director Veit Helmer (most well-known for the 1995 short *Surprise!*, which took 42 awards at 130 festivals) brings forth the situational and (relatively speaking) slightly less slapstick comedy of Buster Keaton, who could tell a complete story from beginning to end with no words at all. Though, in this day and age, it may sound difficult to sit through 100 minutes with no conversation, Helmer has used it to his advantage, recruiting an international cast and emphasizing the role of the sound effects that replace all the dialogue.

The film centers around the agoraphobic Anton (Denis Lavant), who dreams of life on the open sea but instead has been reduced to spending all of his time and energy convincing his blind father that their dilapidated bathhouse is still a thriving business. In truth, only a few people come in every day, most of them bums who will give anything they can find, from buttons to blow-up dolls, as payment for use of the pool.

Enter Eva (Chulpan Khamatova), a beautiful young woman who steals Anton's affections in a strange and beautiful way. Though they obviously have a mutual attraction, they are put at odds by a misunderstanding caused by Anton's brother, Gregor (Terrence Gillespie), who wants to demolish the town and the bathhouse in order to build a futuristic city.

This story is so easy to follow that it demands almost no work on the viewer's part. Some of the characters' relationships are a little unclear, but the acting is brilliant - exaggerated to remain true to the film's influences.

"Not having to concentrate on a text but simply to concentrate on an emotion, gesture or action is something which allows you to refine the work of an actor ..." said the film's star, Denis Lavant.

Coming from the same Vaudevillian tradition that made Chaplin and Keaton famous, the basis for *Tuvalu's* acting style comes from physical movements and facial expressions. Helmer obviously took great care in assembling his cast, who with simple smiles or gestures speak volumes, conveying all their underlying thoughts and intentions.

Visually, *Tuvalu* is nothing short of stunning. Shot in black and white, the film was then tinted to

create a fantastically dynamic look, such that the lack of color was almost unnoticeable in some of the scenes that used more subdued lighting conditions. Art director/production designer Alexander Manasse (*Run Lola Run*) clearly has a great career ahead of him. He lends such charm to the decrepit old house that we completely understand the characters' unwillingness to relinquish it, even though it is literally falling apart.

Though much of the literature tied to the film discusses the fairy tale aspects of *Tuvalu*, this is something that you really must experience for yourself. What I will say is that the film is named for an island in the South Pacific that is roughly one-tenth the size of Washington, D.C. This island becomes the fantasy destination and the "happily ever after" that the characters seek throughout this must-see fairy tale.