

DAILY VARIETY

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Love and Happiness

(Crime drama-B&W-16 mm)

A Terminal Bliss Pictures presentation. Produced, directed by Jordan Alan. Improvisational guidelines, Alan, Charlie Mattera. Camera(Foto-Kem B&W, 16 mm), Alan; editor, Paul O'Bryan; music, Cameron Coulter; sound design, Michael Mattioli; sound, Michael Patrick. Reviewed at Palm Springs Film Festival, Jan 8, 1995. Running time: 92 min.

Charlie.....Charlie Mattera
Johnny.....Keith Bogart
Nina.....Nina Siemaszko
Federal Agent with

Still Camera.....Justin Williams
Stefan/Takashi.....Barry Sobel
Barbara Wyatt.....Audi England
Federal Agent.....James Lawrence
Richard Wyatt.....Jerry Bernard
Uncle Max.....Max Raven
Sulley the Short-Order

Cook.....Paul Bartel
Todd the Mechanic..... Todd Newman
Nicolette/"Laura".....Tina Murphy
Stacey the

Prostitute.....Yesenia Guzman

An outlaw, no-budget, black and white serio-comedy about the popular subject of L.A. hitmen, "Love and Happiness" is a grunge-level "Pulp Fiction." Improvised by a huge cast on dozens of SoCal locations, nervy first feature by Jordan Alan is highly fragmented and often murky in its narrative particulars, but nevertheless maintains a break-neck momentum and level of creative inventiveness that rivets viewer attention. A thoroughly amoral piece about a killer-for-hire who sees his work in very moral terms, pic could easily found offensive and is of highly questionable value in terms of content. But the talent on display in this impoverished context is undeniable, and pic should surface at fests

and on the specialized circuit catering to audiences interested in vibrant, if not easily digestible, work.

Lensed in hand-held style and presented in short sequences that jump all over the place and introduce new characters at such a pace that subtitles are often(helpfully) used to identify them, this is the tale of an underworld thug who hates L.A. and wants out, but has many miles to go before he sleeps.

Inasmuch as Charlie (Charlie Mattera) very much lives the life of a Hollywood actor, consulting regularly with his agents and taking jobs from wealthy clients as they come up, the story functions very transparently as an allegory for the film business, with all the venality, tracherousness and selfishness intact.

The handsome, hunky Charlie, who looks like a leading man and talks like a goodfella, commands a high price for his thoroughly professional services, but he "only does women." Specifically, he caters to wealthy men whose uniformly ghastly wives have sucked them dry emotionally and financially, men to whom he imagines he's giving another chance at happiness once their mates are disposed of.

A couple of murders down the line, it starts to become apparent that Charlie has a whole network of people working for him, some of whom operate out of a chic beauty salon, where future victims are easily found.

The vast cast of characters eventually comes to include a mechanic who rigs ladies' cars to kill them, a swinger who pushes his wife into the arms of a female prostitute to open her up sexually, a beautiful hairdresser who's actually an FBI undercover op, a reptilian agent who embraces Eastern philosophy, a weapons merchant(the inim-

itable Paul Bartel) who fronts as a shortorder chef, and a host of other examples of L.A. scum, slime and detritus.

Having repeatedly told his wife (Nina Siemaszko) that he wants to quit, Charlie still has tremendous difficulty leaving the Life behind. Sensing disloyalty within his ranks, he initiates a bloodbath that is both repetitive and confusing as to its necessity, and caps that with the hiring of a supposed look-alike actor whom he intends to kill to throw the authorities off his trail so he and his wife can escape to never-never land.

Some of "Love and Happiness" is more distended and murkily motivated than it needs to be. But in spite of the improvisatory approach, Alan impressively manages to zigzag the story into what ultimately resembles a straight line, and a great many of the characters leap to vivid life despite the relatively short screen time accorded to them.

Given the subject matter, pic is low on actual violence and gore, with many of the murders shot obliquely or avoided altogether. Fact that Charlie preys uniquely upon women will offend many, while they and others may be legitimately put off by what can be construed as a defense of Charlie's loathsome lifestyle by virtue of his own "moral code."

Still, this is a diabolically clever, risk-taking, edge-walking debut that possesses a deeply mordant humor and a truly dark take on the L.A. scene and its denizens.

Tech credits are bargain-basement but crackling with energy. Al Green song that provided the title is heard over final credit.

— Todd McCarthy