

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Hal Hartley** and
screening of ***Amateur***

January 14, 1995

Series: *True Fiction Pictures: A Hal Hartley Retrospective*

AMATEUR

UGC/Zenith/True Fiction Pictures. 1994. 105 minutes. 35mm print courtesy Sony Pictures Classics.

Written and Directed by Hal Hartley. Produced by Hal Hartley and Ted Hope. Executive producers, Jerome Brownstein, Lindsey Law, Scott Meek, and Yves Marmion. Photographed by Michael Spiller. Edited by Steve Hamilton. Original score by Ned Rifle and Jeffrey Taylor. Production design by Steve Rosenzweig. Sound by Jeff Pullman.

With Isabelle Huppert (Isabelle), Martin Donovan (Thomas), Elina Lowensohn (Sofia), Damian Young (Edward), Chuck Montgomery (Jan), Parker Posey (Girl Squatter), and Dwight Ewell (Boy Squatter).

"The thing is, none of us are really the work. The work is the work. The film is the work, I am probably as close to it as it gets, because the film is, actually, a result of my preoccupations. I don't want anybody's contribution to be so particular as to take away from the guiding aesthetic principle of the entire piece. The piece itself should have a personality. There shouldn't be disparate personalities within the piece. I guess my job, by the time I'm directing it, is one of 'taste'; of determining balances, judging what seems appropriate and what doesn't. I don't like to call attention to photography. I know my films are extreme in certain ways, like the fact that nobody smiles. But I like to think that the camera work shows a similar restraint. I want the photography, the acting, the sound recording, the editing, the music, and the dialogue to all have a perfect understanding of each other, to all be working in concert.

-Hal Hartley, interviewed by Graham Fuller

From review by Todd McCarthy, *Variety*, May 17, 1994:

A former nun who writes erotic stories, an amnesiac with a criminal past and "the most notorious porno actress in the world" bounce off each other with tasty results in

Hal Hartley's *Amateur*. Just as quirky and idiosyncratic as the Gotham-based writer-director's earlier efforts, this one pushes the spiky humor a bit more to the fore while unfolding a tale loaded with offbeat oppositions and odd character detailing. This outing will do little to expand his public beyond the core specialized audience that has supported his work to date.

Isabelle Huppert plays a woman who recently checked out of convent life after 15 years. A failure at writing about sex, a subject about which she seems to have no personal knowledge, she also claims to be a nymphomaniac to Thomas (Martin Donovan), a man who awakens on a downtown New York street with no memory and is trustingly taken in by Isabelle. So start the odd juxtapositions.

Before long, it becomes clear that Thomas has been pushed out a window (and is presumed dead) by his wife, Sofia (Elina Lowensohn), a porno queen whose desperate financial straits lead her to deal with a powerful arms merchant. This sends the film away from Isabelle and Thomas onto an unexpected tangent involving Thomas' accountant Edward (Damian Young) and two well-educated goons who are on Sofia's and Thomas' tails.

The main characters all come together in upstate New York in a tragicomic climax in which nearly surreal humor takes precedence over full character revelation or dramatic closure.

Viewers not in tune with the filmmaker's approach may find the comic elements forced and contrived. But Hartley's technique is now so refined and precise that he easily achieves his desired effects; the artistic layering of stylization in performance, timing and visuals pulls the action sufficiently away from reality to induce one to accept the strange string of events. This same self-conscious artistry, however, may also be the major element limiting Hartley to a small audience.

Donovan can't do much with a character who basically doesn't exist, but remainder of the cast is excellent. Huppert has a sweet gravity underlaid with quietly suggestive humor. Memorable in a minor role in Hartley's last film, *Simple Men*, Lowensohn takes on a much bigger part here, that of the sexpot goddess, and makes the most of it.

Young gives a wild performance as the lanky accountant who comes unglued after some electro-shock torture. Chuck Montgomery and David Simonds are deliciously cool, calm and collected as the henchmen, and Pamela Stewart gives a terrific reading as a hopelessly sentimental cop.

Hartley's films become more impressively designed with each outing. Lenser Michael Spiller is a wizard of precision, deftly focusing the viewer's eye on the desired object. Color schemes in Steve Rosenzweig's production design are exceedingly elegant, and fine score by Ned Rifle and Jeffrey Taylor effectively helps set the cool but enticing tone..

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of screenings and discussions with significant creative figures in film, television, and digital media, as supported with a generous grant from The Pinewood Foundation.

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