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MOVIES

Review: 'Heaven Knows What' Dramatizes a Young Junkie's Life

Heaven Knows What
NYT Critics' Pick

By **NICOLAS RAPOLD** MAY 28, 2015

The characters of the junkie chronicle “Heaven Knows What” lead their lives in the open, which is to say on the streets of New York. Whenever a couple of them are arguing — which is frequently — you glimpse passers-by steering their way around the commotion with the practiced resolve of New Yorkers trying to mind their own business. At the very least, the directors, Josh and Benny Safdie, have created a small, beautiful classic of street theater by rendering these public disputes within a vibrant Manhattan setting through ingenious photography.

The Safdies' focus, Harley (Arielle Holmes), is hooked on heroin and seriously infatuated with a fellow addict, Ilya (Caleb Landry Jones). When we first see Harley, she's preparing to appease her cruel, weirdly imperious mate with an act of self-destruction that instead tears them apart for a while. All of which might sound hopeless to endure at first, if this fleet-footed film didn't have such a beautifully attuned eye and ear for Harley and her fellow street dwellers from moment to moment.

Harley's breakaway from Ilya leads us into her usual blur of days and nights on the Upper West Side, in the parks and byways that she and her dooper friends call home. She eventually takes up with a boxer-faced dealer, Mike (Buddy Duress), who's subletting from a raspy-voiced den mother for addicts (apparently in a rent-

controlled apartment). From one fix to the next, the movie tumbles right along with Harley; her stringy blond hair and eager eyes still suggest a teenage runaway rather than a burnout.

In the film, the screaming need of addiction isn't front and center, and the Safdies don't romanticize her life, which is partly drawn from that of Ms. Holmes, who was cast after a street encounter. "Heaven Knows What" portrays Harley's experiences by building up from ground-level perceptions: the back and forth of shouted arguments and negotiations, the exchanges of glances, the stop and start of street pursuits. The director of photography, Sean Price Williams, skillfully orchestrates lingering close-ups and up-the-street long shots, which are beautifully interwoven in the editing by Ronald Bronstein and Benny Safdie.

Ilya, Harley's obsession, is by any measure a cowardly creep, but this fierce independent is perhaps the most dangerous drug for her. As played by Mr. Jones, the metal-music-loving brooder could nearly be a high school trenchcoat-mafia type if he wasn't on the streets, yet Harley remains wedded to her starry-eyed vision of self-sacrifice and devotion to him. The paroxysm of feelings that he induces in her seem to be expressed by the analog synthesizer soundtrack and its shuddering cascades (arranged by Isao Tomita from music by Claude Debussy).

While Harley's story is based on Ms. Holmes's writings (which publicity materials say will soon be a published memoir titled "Mad Love in New York City"), the character remains a bit opaque and not fully formed. That's perhaps because she hasn't yet fleshed out her own life beyond chasing Ilya and drugs. But the Safdies avoid using her gamine looks to arouse sympathy for her risky lifestyle, and her druggie milieu seems destined to age better than the walk on the wild side offered by "The Panic in Needle Park."

Born and raised in New York — an upbringing they partly portrayed in their earlier film "Daddy Longlegs" — the Safdie brothers capture a density of activity as endemic to the city as it is to Harley's daily hustle. By tapping into her routines, instead of framing her along solely tragic lines, the filmmakers fashion a diary of experience that's all the more absorbing.

"Heaven Knows What" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian) for drug use throughout, pervasive strong language,

disturbing and violent images, sexuality and graphic nudity.

Heaven Knows What

Opens on Friday

Directed by Josh and Benny Safdie; written by Ronald Bronstein and Josh Safdie, based on the novel "Mad Love in New York City" by Arielle Holmes; director of photography, Sean Price Williams; edited by Benny Safdie and Mr. Bronstein; music by Claude Debussy, arranged by Isao Tomita; production design by Audrey Turner; produced by Oscar Boyson, Sebastian Bear McClard, Josh Safdie and Benny Safdie; released by Radius. Running time: 1 hour 33 minutes.

WITH: Arielle Holmes (Harley), Caleb Landry Jones (Ilya), Buddy Duress (Mike), Necro (Skully), Eléonore Hendricks (Erica), Manny Aguila (Evan), Yuri Pleskun (Tommy/Drug Dealer), Diana Singh (Diana) and Benjamin Hampton (Antoine).

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