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MIKE MAPLE

In "Forty Shades of Blue," Rip Torn plays an alcoholic producer of blues records who is past his prime and whose personal life begins to unravel.

Movie Review

No harmony in music man's troubled soul and home

By Ted Fry

Special to The Seattle Times

One of the primary characters in "Forty Shades of Blue" is a rambling 1950s ranch house that's been locked in time as a tarted-up '70s-era showplace.

It belongs to Alan James (Rip Torn), a hell-raising music pioneer and impresario of the early Memphis R&B scene. He's a few decades past his prime and about as comfortable in his skin as his foil wallpaper, chintzy baubles, velour furniture and showbiz memorabilia are in the 21st century.

Torn is magnificent as the now brooding, now raging, now life-of-the-party drunk who has turned emotional avoidance into an art with the same precision he once brought to popular music. He's the monstrous center of this beautiful and expertly heartrending glimpse at dysfunction and disaffection. The film was rightly awarded the top prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival.

Movie review

Showtimes

"Forty Shades of Blue," with Rip Torn, Dina Korzun, Darren Burrows. Directed by Ira Sachs, from a screenplay by Sachs and Michael Rohatyn. 109 minutes. Not rated; suitable for mature audiences. Varsity.

Trapped in the house and in the shadow of Alan's bluster is Laura (Dina Korzun), a damaged, willowy young Russian girl he met and impregnated on a business trip to Moscow. Caring for their 3-year-old son is Laura's main diversion, along with shopping and following Alan to various parties and awards ceremonies where he obligingly plays the part of an ornery old lion of his industry. While he's off vacuously hobnobbing with aging cronies or the younger generations who idolize him, Laura is alternately abandoned, adored or humiliated by the sheer force of his unpredictability.

Laura's mantra is that she's living a wonderful life, but cracks are appearing in her facade as well as the lifestyle that Alan is finding difficult to sustain. The surface becomes more fragile when Alan's grown son Michael (Darren Burrows) arrives at the house for an extended visit.

The word estranged only hints at the relationship between Alan and Michael, who teaches and writes in Los Angeles and is on the downside of a marriage to his newly pregnant wife. With his sullen demeanor, Michael appears at first to be the polar opposite of his father. But the same brand of prodigious rage is barely contained behind his boiling eyes. Michael has known Alan at his irresistibly loathsome best, yet he remains a prodigal disappointment to the great man.

The confluence of personality breakdowns that ultimately unfold in such an unsettling environment are both devastating and fascinating as revealed by director and co-screenwriter Ira Sachs. "Forty Shades of Blue" develops at its own unhurried pace, taking great care to observe nuances of character and place that most movies would quickly gloss over.

Scenes of Laura idly passing days at the mall, or of Alan noodling on his studio piano or mumbling to himself as he passes ghostlike among guests at his own party, lend extraordinary depth to the much bigger things this movie is about.

Completing opposing points of an ensemble acting trinity are Burrows and Korzun, whose performances are as subtle as Torn's is brashly fanatical. Michael's seething calm erupts in disarray when repulsion for his father turns into an attraction for Laura. Although this part of the scenario may seem predictable, the shadows that bring him there and the resolutions all three walk away with are anything but.

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