

Nature, Morality Collide in ‘Nymphomaniac: Vol. 1’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on March 22, 2014 - 10:57am

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Writer/director Lars von Trier creates exposure through his film art. He is unafraid to explore the very nature of being human, while at the same time revealing the very foibles of barriers to our nature – social structures, economies, religion and our own conceits in life. Lars von Trier’s latest barrier breaker is “Nymphomaniac: Vol. 1.”

The title is deceptive – there will be a Vol. 2 released in a couple weeks, with a conclusion to the story – and the term “nymphomaniac” is a loaded gun of unyielding and unwarranted interpretation. The term is like a fingerprint, virtually everyone who can define will define it differently beyond one sentence. In the film’s case study, the title character is a woman – one with a complex psychological past that is connected to a desperate itch to scratch. In her life, the “nymphomania” is shown to be easy to do, but not without negative consequences to her and others. Von Trier tells her tale with a straightforwardness – the film is graphically sexual – to provide an understanding of the intricacies that occur within the physical action. In what we find out, who are we to judge?

A bruised and battered woman named Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg) is found in an alleyway by a man named Seligman (Stellan Skarsgard). He takes her in, and she refuses medical help beyond rest. As she recovers, she begins to tell Seligman her story, and it focuses on a hypersexual urge she has had since childhood. The narrative continues in flashback, with the the younger Joe (Stacy Martin).



Jerome (Shia LaBeouf) and Young Joe (Stacy Martin) in ‘Nymphomaniac: Vol. 1’

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

Joe's story begins with early experimentation – her best friend and she have a competition as to how many men they can seduce on a train – and gradually morphs into her young adult life, with a random series of hook-ups. Her main relationship is with Jerome (Shia LaBeouf), who took her virginity in her young life and haunts her thereafter. She also goes through the sad death of her father (Christian Slater), who was portrayed as a passionate influence.

The story is structured like a novel, with the first five chapters featured in Vol. 1. Seligman, the kind facilitator that listens to Joe's life, is an avid reader and interjects frequently with observations regarding the situations the storyteller gets involved in. For example, he uses a fishing parallel in comparing the young and beautiful Joe to a bright lure with a hook. The symbols are powerful and lovely in the midst of the stark reality of her involvements, the type of impressions that von Trier has used in many of his other films.

The performance of Martin as the young Joe is fearless, and mostly without tears. The character revels in the power of her ability to seduce, and becomes addicted to it in a way that seems beyond her control. Martin is able to convey all of the trials that accompany her condition with extreme sensitivity, passion and a delicate balance of emotions. She understands the plight of Joe, and mixes her forthright nature with a background vulnerability.

The cast that supports Young Joe's efforts realistically react to the actions. LaBeouf sheds several images as the centerpiece man in Joe's life, and he brings an intensity to the character that overwhelms Joe's supposed sexual freedom. Uma Thurman provides an emotional electricity as a cuckolded wife, confronting her confused husband in Joe's love nest. The scene is paced much longer, beyond a comfort zone, and predicts a crack in Joe's precise armor.



Joe (Charlotte Gainsborg) Tells Her Story to Seligman (Stellan Skarsgard) in 'Nymphomaniac: Vol. 1'

Photo credit: Magnolia Pictures

The brilliant film has a reflection, as the private nature of her sexual life becomes so blatantly candid that it questions what the morality means in association with the physical act. What expectations are within it, what responsibility is owned the other partner and who can ultimately hurt or get hurt? As any sexually active person can experience, these type of questions are rift with moral and mental potholes. Von Trier creates these holes through an artistic storm, and our own souls are punctured.

What lies ahead for Vol. 2? The story presumably will tackle the second part of Joe's story, the older and more experienced part that ends in an alley, and recovery from a kind stranger. Apart from the biological imperative part of our being, that kindness is all we can hope for.

"Nymphomaniac: Vol. 1" has a limited release, including Chicago, on March 21st. Featuring Charlotte Gainsbourg, Stellan Skarsgard, Stacy Martin, Shia LaBeouf, Christian Slater and Uma Thurman. Written and directed by Lars von Trier. Not Rated, but contains sexually graphic scenes.



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