

## Common Delivers Best Work to Date in Problematic 'LUV'

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Assigned the role of World's Worst Father Figure, Common delivers a performance so compelling that it nearly makes Sheldon Candis' blood-soaked odyssey worth the trip. Nearly, however, is the key word. For all of its merits, this picture derails into a ditch of heavy-handed implausibility at the precise moment when it should be soaring.

One of the recurring images in "LUV," which is memorably etched in its poster art, is the back of a child's head as it looks off into a blurred universe that it can't fully comprehend. Much of the tangled, murky plot is viewed from the perspective of this 11-year-old boy, Woody (Michael Rainey Jr.), who shares the audience's confusion at the mounting danger that threatens to engulf him entirely. Candis' vision of Baltimore is intensely claustrophobic, with houses uneasily wedged against one another, confining the desperate protagonists like rats in a maze.

With his drug-addicted mother supposedly recovering at a [rehab and detox clinic in North Carolina](#) [12], Woody longs for a parental substitute. It's with great misfortune that Woody's Uncle Vincent (Common) has finished serving an eight year prison sentence just in time to take advantage of his nephew's naïveté. Vincent is a reprehensible man, but it's his flawed pursuit of redemption coupled with Common's effortless charisma that makes him so transfixing. When Woody exudes nervousness after being ogled by one of his adoring female classmates, Vincent becomes enraged and vows to make a man out of him before the day is done. And thus begins a very long day—and even longer night—for this unlikely duo, as they encounter a series of foreboding faces, many of them concealing devious intentions. All Vincent wants to do is revise his shameful legacy by opening a crab shack restaurant at a foreclosed warehouse property. There's little surprise when he's denied the loan, thus forcing him to revert back to his illegal methods of raising the money. What's unforgivable is how he strings the boy along on these increasingly dangerous misadventures, while giving him half-baked lessons in driving cars and firing guns. After a particularly monstrous tirade, Vincent tearfully confesses that Woody is the only person left in the world that he can trust. Word of advice to all street hustlers: if your sole trustworthy partner-in-crime is an 11-year-old with a shaky trigger finger, it's probably time to hang it up.



Danny Glover and Common star in Sheldon Candis' LUV.

*Photo credit: Indomina Releasing*

Candis' first-rate ensemble has a ball sinking their teeth into juicy confrontations opposite Common, particularly Dennis Haysbert as Vincent's cold-blooded boss, Mr. Fish, taking a refreshing departure from his long-running gig as Allstate's stoic spokesperson. It's wonderful to hear the same man who immortalized the tagline, "Are you in good hands?" bark out embittered dialogue like, "America's not a country—it's a company!" Danny Glover is also in fine form as a faux caregiver who refers to Woody as "Little Barack," while Charles S. Dutton is terrific as the genial bringer of exceedingly dire news. There's an inevitably tragic dinner meeting that begins with the characters cracking open crabs with their bare hands before swapping their utensils for guns. When Vincent teaches Woody the proper way to eat a crab, there are echoes of the "Beast It!" scene in "Beasts of the Southern Wild."

Some touching father-son chemistry sporadically occurs between Vincent and Woody, but it doesn't make their relationship any less abusive. Everything falls apart in the final act as Woody suddenly transforms from a scared kid into a ludicrously assured con man, finding the exact right words during a spectacularly frightening showdown, while somehow managing to drive competently through several states, despite having only received one half-lesson. Editor Jeff Wishengrad's excessive utilization of jump cuts adds nothing to the drama, though Nuno Malo's score succeeds in bringing an ethereal, "Crash"-like glow to the picture's standard assortment of grit and grime.





Charles S. Dutton, Common and Michael Rainey Jr. star in Sheldon Candis' LUV.

Photo credit: Bill Gray

It's the self-loathing that Vincent harbors that makes him a more interesting low-life than, say, Fagin in "Oliver Twist." Common's performance is at its most riveting when his fearless façade crumbles, revealing a terrified soul wildly clinging to his last chance at salvation, even if it means endangering the life of an innocent child. He's a fascinating train wreck, providing the veteran rapper with his richest screen role to date. With only one other feature credit to his name (2007's "Young Cesar"), filmmaker Candis proves to be an exceptionally gifted director of actors. "LUV" doesn't quite work, but it displays a great deal of potential, both in front of and behind the camera.

*'LUV' stars Common, Michael Rainey Jr., Dennis Haysbert, Danny Glover, Charles S. Dutton, Meagan Good, Lonette McKee, Michael Kenneth Williams and Russell Hornsby. It was written by Sheldon Candis and Justin Wilson and directed by Sheldon Candis. It opened January 18th at AMC River East 21. It is rated R.*



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