

GFF 2014 – Nymphomaniac: Volumes I & II (Lars von Trier, 2014)



Lars von Trier is an undeniable master of character study. In *Nymphomaniac*, when all the provocative material is stripped away, both promotionally and cinematically, what is left is the undeniably profound study of a woman torn between holding onto her problems and embracing them wholeheartedly.

On a snowy night, an old literary enthusiast named Seligman finds a woman badly beaten on the street. Her name is Joe, and as he takes her in for the night, they sit down and discuss with visceral honesty, the women's lustful and torrid sexual past.

What von Trier has created was mercilessly split into two separate parts (his words, not mine) for its cinematic release. It does in fact, work really well. The two films, while both admirable in their own respects, do feel almost like polar opposites; as if the story has been suddenly turned on its head.

VOLUME I

It takes a lot of tenacity to make a film about obsession with sex. In a way, it could be construed by many as indulgent, but von Trier, with his thoughtful script and his wonderful cast has succeeded in making something that feels entirely natural and soft, rather than exploitative and anatomical.

What initially strikes you in the first volume of this story, is that it feels relaxingly unpretentious. Although von Trier is visionary in his methods, his work is often dismissed as

too symbolic for his own good. He smartly tackled that by dissecting his symbols and metaphors on screen. Not only does it make the film much easier to follow, it lays all its cards on the table; never seeming to be shady.

The highlights of the film most definitely come down to its performers. As Seligman and Joe converse through the night, their performances by Stellan Skarsgård and Charlotte Gainsbourg feel primal, despite the dialogue feeling scripted. It's a technique that works in the film's favour, as this woman's infatuated past feels almost fable like, as if read from the pages of a book. Stacy Martin is most impressive in her first film role as Joe's younger self. She glows a rather youthful beauty, and gives potentially the best lead performance in the film; deserving praise for her inhibition-free attitude. She's clearly delved into this film just as deep as the protégés lower down the credits. Surprisingly, Shia LaBeouf, being the new-found pretentious performance artist that he is, is not overtly annoying here. If you get past his questionable accent (he's channelling his Australian/Irish/East London roots, evidently), he gives a fine performance as the only man to be remembered through her years of sexual exploration.

Of course, the sex must be addressed. Much to everyone's surprise, sexual gratuitousness is not what inhabits *Nymphomaniac*. What there is is entirely justified and tasteful, never straying into the exploitative. The most explosive scene comes within the third chapter, 'Mrs H'. Both comical and heartbreaking, it's a fantastic testimony to the screenwriting and Uma Thurman, who gives one of the best performances of her career.

What feels so great about the first volume is this unexpected humour that is laced through von Trier's beautiful script. It's indulgent in the right areas, surprisingly unpretentious and both lustful and desperately sullen. If the film was to carry on on a different but not too dissimilar tangent, it may

have been a masterpiece as a whole body of work. That leads us on to...

VOLUME II

It's an exceptionally long film, and at some point, desires to veer into something other than this woman's sexual addiction. It does so, but in a way that after a few effective comical stabs, feels a little bit contrived, something most definitely not associated with von Trier's work.

It's hard to discuss this point in the film without spoiling it, so I will try my hardest not to give anything away. Whilst the first half is much of what you already know about *Nymphomaniac*, the second half is fairly unknown. It should be understood that, despite appearances from Jamie Bell (whose sadomasochistic performance is as impressive as it is disturbing) and Willem Defoe, Volume II is where the ideas may slightly run thin for von Trier.

Saying that, it is an enjoyable thing to watch, still oddly funny but overrun with something that's ultimately bleak. It's a hard thing to watch as it develops, as the sexual liberation that makes the first half so enticing to watch disappears into something realistic and consequential.

It needed direction, and the direction that von Trier took it in was sometimes eery; sometimes unexpected, but that doesn't make it any less beguiling and strangely magical to sit through.

[Nymphomaniac appetizer – Chapter 8: The Gun](#) from [Zentropa](#) on [Vimeo](#).