

film review

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On and Off the Skids

By Josef Woodward, August 30, 2006

Factotum. Matt Dillon, Lili Taylor, Fisher Stevens, and Marisa Tomei star in a film written by Bent Hamer and Jim Stark, based upon the novel by Charles Bukowski, and directed by Hamer.

Reviewed by Josef Woodward

For those of us who buy into Charles Bukowski's aesthetic, the late L.A. writer created pearls of wisdom hidden in squalor on the outskirts. Others see a self-indulgent barfly who happened to have a way with words. Both camps may find their biases confirmed by the strangely moving *Factotum*, bringing us into the courageous and/or shabby life of an infamous American writer.

Factotum is a natural follow-up to *Barfly*, the 1987 film with Mickey Rourke as Henry Chinaski, the alter ego of Bukowski (who wrote *Barfly*'s screenplay and the original novel on which *Factotum* is based). Perhaps tellingly, both films were directed by Europeans — German Barbet Schroeder for the earlier film and Norwegian director Bent Hamer for *Factotum* — who bring a sympathetic, artful veneer to the projects.

Hamer realizes his film with hypnotic pacing and observational calm. The narrative slithers along on its own time, with characters detached from normal day-to-day concerns, lubricated by booze and a certain cavalier philosophy. Much credit also goes to cinematographer John Christian Rosenlund and composer Kristin Asbjørnsen — a cult hero in Norway — for their moody sensory cool.

This time around, Chinaski is fodder for another grand, laconic performance by Matt Dillon. The role extends Dillon's bad boy twists in *Drugstore Cowboy*, but now he's older, more grizzled and occasionally sadistic, and more gifted with tough-loving wisdom. Chinaski drifts through odd jobs approached as necessary evils to be avoided by visits to bars. He also falls in with lovers, played by Lili Taylor and Marisa Tomei, but we sense that Chinaski's heart is most easily swayed by the magnetism of drink and prospects of literary posterity.

"People don't need love," said Chinaski, on a morning after both he and his lover have vomited upon waking, just before breaking up. "They need success of one form or another." At another point, Chinaski offered, "Even at my lowest time, I could feel the words bubbling inside of me." Capturing some of the spirit and depth of those bubbling words in the film medium is tricky business, but somehow Hamer et al. manage the feat. Or maybe that's just a Bukowski fan talking.