

Arts & Entertainment

Alone Again, Unnaturally

By Michael Elkin, Arts & Entertainment Editor
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Director Harmony Korine and his Marilyn (Samantha Morton) in "Mister Lonely"

Photo by O'South/IFC Films

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Peace and Harmony.

Early on, they didn't exactly go together like a horse and carriage.

No, in those hectic less-than-halcyon days, Harmony Korine's vehicle of choice took him on rides of fantasia, down drug-induced and potholed paths of bumps and bizarre behavior, leading the 22-year-old skiddoo/skidding "Kids" screenwriter much room to grow up in -- if he ever would.

Married with a child now, this is a different piece of Harmony one sees on screen, as his "Mister Lonely" hopes to find audience company as it premieres this Friday.

A surreal surfeit of characters accompany "Mister Lonely" on his road to revelation as the Michael Jackson imitator joins up with a whole company of committed impersonators, including a Marilyn Monroe misfit whose seven-year itch yearns to be scratched by the "Thriller" from vanilla that is the jejune Jackson.

Ironic that the sui generis Harmony would be so generous with his time and talent to devote it to a film of doppelgängers. But the once doped-up artist sees clearly now, and what he sees is the

alienation in us, one and all.

It all shows up on screen in a phantasmorical film that is at once daring and distant.

But ... dangerous? Only to himself. Heralded as the most maverick of indie filmmakers, Korine made a pitch for punchlines when researching his post-"Gummo" movie for "Fight Harm." Harmony lived up to the film's title as he sought out street brawls that landed him in a hospital, close to being relegated to a hospice.

The brawler was bruised so badly he took lumps all around, on and off the set.

Has the filmmaker of "Diary of Anne Frank, Part II" -- more Attica than attic-based -- parted with the past and settled down? Settle is a relative word, he allows. And the mainstream he continues to flow against is still very much his current way of being au courant.

Settle? "Well, in a way," this eminently likeable landsman with a lens says with a laugh. "I mean, I have a wife and a child now."

Which is not to say he has given up on his nonlinear ways, a manner of looking at life that is, at 360 degrees, theater in the round for those who believe that what goes around comes around.

Harmony, who had company in penning "Mister Lonely" -- collaborating with his brother Avi -- is proudly a fringe feature, whether in synagogue under a tallis or in the performance art forum fomenting. "I live on the fringes -- those are the kinds of characters I'm interested in," he says of the otherworldly Wacko-Jacko (nicely played with a weird undercurrent by Diego Luna) or Charlie Chaplin (portrayed as a great didactic by actor Denis Lavant), in "Mister Lonely."

"These are people who create their own language, invent their own drama."

Much like Korine himself. At 35, the filmmaker/artist/author -- think of him as a rebel Renaissance of a renegade -- has kicked up quite stir. But when the dust settles, naysayers and aficionados alike can find gold dust among the grains of grotesqueries Korine has created.

His jagged edges jar, but they are also drawn with a magical fine line right on the edge of beauty/beastliness. (Appropriately for one with a predilection for pictorial prestidigitation, Korine is friends and has collaborated with illusionist David Blaine.)

As for the "kid" who wrote the iconoclastic "Kids" a Bar Mitzvah world away, he has matured in those 13 years as a dad with a Dadaist perspective. Korine scopes the past without regret, even if those drug daze in which he saw Hollywood as a hallucinogen are only token tokens now. "I look back on those days with great fondness, no regrets -- not that it was a good thing to do."

And as for those wondering if a man whose life has been somewhat out of sequence will make a sequel ... "Diary of Anne Frank: Part III"? He laughs, getting the joke -- for those who didn't get a chance to see the short, it had nothing to do with the Holocaust heroine -- "Why not? It's all exciting."

Get him excited? That's what bringing up Judaism will do: "A shout out to my peeps," says the "100 percent Jewish person" who finds "so much beauty in the religion."

Beauty is this to thee, that to me, opined Keats, and Korine has his own catchphrase. Which may explain why he created a work of video art with Johnny Depp some years back about "The Devil, the Sinner and His Journey" -- performing O.J. Simpson in blackface.

Self blackmailing his own ambitions? "I know it wasn't politically correct, but I always loved vaudeville and I loved Al Jolson, which is why I did it," he says. "I found it oddly fascinating."

As for his get-out-of-town get-up, "I love performing, I like dressing myself up."

He expects dressing downs from others; that's part of the performance art arc. And if he himself were to imitate another artist, like "Mister Lonely" does, he feels good: "I'd be James Brown."

Korine's got a brand new bag, and it's the conceit that "Mister Lonely" -- as alien as it may appear to a Hollywood fan -- may be his most mainstream movie of all. He likes the idea and laughs. "That may well be, although that wasn't my intent. I just had a story to tell."

So, what's the story with Harmony Korine? Does he himself -- facing a future filled with more acclaim than acrimony -- consider himself a Mister Lonely? Alone again, unnaturally?

"Some days," he says sweetly.