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Hallam Foe

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Title: *Hallam Foe*

Country of Origin: UK

Year: 2007

Language: English

Production Companies: Sigma Films, Film4, Glasgow Film Finance, Independent Film Sales, Ingenious Film Partners, Lunar Films, Scottish Screen

Filming Locations: Edinburgh, Glasgow, Innerleithen

Director: David Mackenzie

Producer: Gillian Berrie

Screenwriters: Peter Jinks, David Mackenzie, Ed Whitmore

Cinematographer: Giles Nuttgens

Art Director: Caroline Grebbell

Editor: Colin Monie

Runtime: 95 minutes

Cast (Starring): Jamie Bell, Sophia Myles, Ciarán Hinds, Claire Forlani

Synopsis: *Hallam Foe*'s titular anti-hero is a teenage boy profoundly traumatised by his late mother's death by drowning. He has retreated, literally and figuratively, to a solitary life spent spying on others and living in his childhood tree house. Hallam's ongoing emotional pain and confusion stem in significant part from his refusal to accept the official verdict that his mother died by her own hand (she was severely depressed); instead, he believes that she was murdered by Verity, the woman who has subsequently married his father. When an angry confrontation with his stepmother ends in a bout of fierce, anguished copulation between the two, Hallam flees the family home and seeks to begin a new life in the Scottish capital city of Edinburgh. Once there, he accidentally espies Kate, a young woman who bears an uncanny physical resemblance to his late mother. Hallam follows Kate to her place of work, a prestigious city-centre hotel, and persuades her to give him a job there. His new position comes with an added bonus: the building's iconic clock tower offers an urban successor to the elevated voyeuristic vantage point previously provided by Hallam's old tree house. He uses this to spy obsessively on Kate, and even finds a way to ascend to the roof of the apartment block in which she lives, so that he can observe her daily comings and goings at close quarters. Hallam and Kate begin a relationship after he confesses the painful source of his fascination with her. The bond between the pair is fractured, however, by Kate's discovery that Hallam has previously spied on her, and also by the unexpected arrival in Edinburgh of his father and Verity, who require Hallam's signature in order to begin the redevelopment of some land left by his mother in her will. Enraged, Hallam briefly returns home and almost drowns Verity in the same loch where his mother died. This

near-disastrous confrontation provokes a much-needed catharsis. Hallam and his father are reconciled, and the former accepts that his mother was not murdered by anyone. Back in Edinburgh, Hallam parts amicably from Kate, and the pair loosely agree to meet again in several years' time.

Critique: It feels fitting that *Hallam Foe* won the Hitchcock d'Or award for Best Film at the 2007 *Festival Du Film Britannique* in Dinard, France: co-writer/director David Mackenzie's fourth feature offers viewers a sense of what several of Hitchcock's best-known films might have looked and felt like if shot and set in present-day Scotland. Elements of *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Psycho* (1960) are knowingly contained and combined within *Hallam Foe's* narrative. The film's hero is, after all, a troubled young man who: (a) cross-dresses as part of his refusal to properly acknowledge his mother's death and works in a hotel; (b) repeatedly traverses city rooftops and is obsessed with a blonde woman who is the uncanny double of his deceased beloved; (c) is an obsessive voyeur who treats the countless lit windows of a major urban settlement as if they were the screens of a giant open-air multiplex cinema. To complete matters, *Hallam Foe* even comes complete with its own bona fide MacGuffin, the seemingly suspicious, but actually innocuous, hole that Hallam finds early on in the boat within which his mother drowned.

Ultimately, however, *Hallam Foe* is not so much an exercise in postmodern period pastiche as it is an emotionally sympathetic study of the psychological trauma that attends the uncertain transition between male adolescence and adulthood. While Hallam's personal circumstances and behaviour are unusually lurid in nature, the rite of passage that he undergoes during the months immediately before and after his eighteenth birthday will be familiar to many viewers who have led far more physically and psychologically sheltered lives than he has. Consider, for instance, the cumulative effect of the series of avian metaphors—Hallam spends much of his time living and moving far above ground, while Verity tells him near the movie's opening that 'it's time to fly the nest'—found throughout *Hallam Foe's* narrative. Ultimately, these downplay the film's elements of proto-Hitchcockian tension (Hallam as the dangerous cuckoo in the nest of unsuspecting girlfriend Kate's personal and professional lives) and prioritise instead the idea of an emotionally gentler and more generous character portrait of adulthood successfully attained (Hallam as the bereaved little sparrow who eventually learns how to fly and fend for himself). A crucial difference between the two nest-like environments that Hallam is seen inhabiting (his childhood tree house, the hotel clock tower) also appears to support this reading of the movie. On one hand, the tree house is a space within which Hallam attempts to make time stand still (creating a shrine to his dead parent, regressing to prepubescent rituals and pastimes). But on the other, the clock tower is an edifice dedicated to the public acknowledgement of time's ceaseless passing. The people and events that Hallam witnesses from that vantage point help to propel him beyond the clutches of childhood grief.

Hallam Foe's examination of the vulnerability and pain that frequently characterise pre-adult life places the movie foursquare within a major tradition of Scottish filmmaking. From the days of pioneering works such as Bill Douglas's *Childhood Trilogy* (1972-78) and Bill Forsyth's *That Sinking Feeling* (1979), Scottish filmmakers have repeatedly been drawn to themes of childhood and

adolescent experience. At the same time, however, Hallam's privileged socio-economic background (his family owns a rambling country estate) distinguishes him from the working-class urban protagonists found within most Scottish childhood films. This fact is perhaps reflected in, and undoubtedly underscored by, the fact that much of *Hallam Foe's* narrative unfolds within the aesthetically breath-taking and financially opulent environs of Edinburgh's historic city centre. Indeed, a significantly under-acknowledged trend within twenty-first-century Scottish cinema involves the increasing prominence of the country's capital city as a key physical and cultural setting for many Scottish filmmakers' work. In a range of different ways, movies such as Annie Griffin's *Festival* (2005), Richard Jobson's *A Woman In Winter* (2005) and *New Town Killers* (2008), and Sylvain Chomet's *The Illusionist* (2010) introduce audiences to a local cultural milieu that is clearly distinct from the West Coast urban industrial and rural Highland settings which dominated Scotland's cinematic representation throughout the twentieth century. For that reason, we could say that *Hallam Foe* reflects one important aspect of contemporary Scottish film culture's ongoing maturation, as well as telling a story within which a young Scotsman learns how to grow up.

Jonathan Murray