

Factotum

As far as synopsising a movie's plot, *Factotum*, the new film based upon the Charles Bukowski novel of the same name, makes for one of the easier tasks around. The film opens in a situation that seems all too familiar for Henry Chinaski, the protagonist and the real Bukowski's alter ego: he loses his menial job, drinks himself numb and mails off short stories to publishers who have no interest in printing his work. It's as if the film has picked up somewhere along the bumpy arc of a roughly drawn spiral whose only possible progression is downward. The few changes encountered are presented with a languor that lends them at best a nominal irrelevancy: the lowly jobs (a pickle factory; a bicycle shop; a janitor), the fellow drunks (portrayed by Lili Taylor and Marissa Tomei), the sun-skipped, smoky bars. In lieu of accretion the movie is content simply to switch incidentals, with Chinaski himself remaining incorrigibly the same: desperately drunk, doleful but for his fleeting fits of self-importance, occasionally wry and always hopelessly desultory.

Unlike other films based upon Bukowski's work, *Factotum* is reserved and somber, shunning the aura – often perpetrated by Bukowski himself – that there is something Glamorous, Romantic or even Sexy about the life of an unemployable alcoholic. This is a tension that is frequently encountered in Bukowski's writings: self-aggrandized ego-bloating confronting the reality of writing poetry about the shit stains in his pants. While I find something appealing in and am sympathetic to the giant middle finger Bukowski blazed in the face of contemporary America's obsession with monotonous production, the flip side is something sophomoric and desperate.

His language – the text is often read over the film – is stark and direct, avoiding the overly florid and traditionally accepted standards of “literature” (if placed in any genre he would most likely be considered a Beat); yet there is something too self-consciously emphatic, not to mention harshly sexist (he describes sex with his girlfriend as “She took it like it was a knife that was killing her.”), that lends his words a panicked sense of striving, as if the façade of “realness” he was insisting upon might crumble apart at any moment.

Bukowski lived a hard and harsh life. As a child, his father beat him regularly and severely; he also suffered from an acute case of *acne vulgaris* that left his face permanently pock-marked and contributed to his sense of being an outsider. As an adult he floated through life quite literally as a factotum, with each job providing the paycheck needed to drink the day away. As Chinaski says to an employer, “All I want to do is get my check and get drunk. Now, that might not sound noble, but it's my choice.” Through it all he was attempting to establish a writing career, a goal that eluded him until he was well into his 50's.

This film succeeds by capturing the sadness and despair that I can only imagine were such an inherent part of Bukowski's life. Instead of lionizing an inherent “coolness” to his struggles, a la earlier Bukowski-based films like *Barfly* or *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, *Factotum* de-emphasizes any sense of the glorious, preferring instead

the somber, though not macabre, reality of his efforts. The tone is consistently underwhelming, dry and cyclical, and this lends the movie a heightened sense of veracity.

This movie's de-emphasis of the glorious occurs in several ways. Though the book is set in Los Angeles, Bukowski's longtime hometown, Director Bent Hamer chose to stage his version in Minneapolis, a long cry from the glitz and glamour of Hollywood. Also, the bar scenes are shot in the shoddy, blue-collar joints where the poor in wallet and spirit find reprieve.

The most successful means of accomplishing the film's gently plodding tone is in the casting of Matt Dillon to play Chinaski/Bukowski. Dillon is one of the few – along with perhaps Johnny Depp, Kevin Bacon, and Robert Downey, Jr. – of the pretty-boy, Brat-pack 80's stars who currently have a career of any significance. His Officer Ryan was the best part of last year's *Crash*, though as Chinaski he reminds me more of his subdued loser attempting to hang on to the past in *Beautiful Girls*. There's something reminiscent of Jack Nicholson in Dillon's methodical, weighted delivery, as if every word were under deliberation before being uttered from his husky voice. As Chinaski, Dillon's cheeks are red and pocked with the broken blood vessels of the drunk, and his broad-shouldered bulk and beard give him a vaguely ursine feel. His performance is subdued and consistent and all too believable for its sunken familiarity with life's harder aspects. Dillon's portrayal gives Chinaski a sense of dignity and the human, however muddled and hollow the reality was.

Factotum depicts the reality of the common phrase “drowning one's sorrows” with a balance and directness that neither judges nor excuses. Those who prefer films that moralize will be frustrated by the reserve taken here. This is not an easy movie to watch, and odds are you'll wake up the next morning hung-over from the experience. As Chinaski says during a betting spree, “The racetrack crowd is the world brought down to size. Life grinding against death, and losing. Nobody wins, finally. We are only seeking a reprieve, a moment out of the glare.”