

Nelly

(Dir. Anne Émond, 101 mins)

By Beth Webb

The subject of Nelly Arcan is an organic match for director Anne Émond, a respected Montreal-based director who features in with an appetite for women and sexuality on film. *Nuit #1*, her electric debut feature, begins with a one night stand that evolves into an intelligent character piece, while *Our Loved Ones*, a sombre family drama, reserves pivotal moments for its female characters.

With *Nelly*, Émond treads familiar turf – the biopic of prolific author Nelly Arcan, who committed suicide in 2009, with its Canadian star Mylène Mackay in the lead, is Émond's bread and butter. Set via a series of narratives, all starring Mackay, that blur seamlessly between Arcan's reality and her fictional characters' lives, Émond's knack for storytelling plays strongly to the film's advantage.

Flitting between a coveted sex worker, a troubled drug addict and a fragile starlet, Émond refuses to fully commit to fact or fiction. Much as Arcan transferred her experiences as an escort turned sex worker directly onto the page, something that both shocked and enticed French and Canadian readers, the line between the life of the author on screen and her now three-dimensional characters simply isn't there. It's an unflinching account of success, the path to it and the fear it invokes upon the person that has it. In one particular scene, a well-intentioned delivery woman leaves Arcan quietly devastated after the simple declaration that the author's first novel was her favourite.

The only common theme between each vignette is the fragility of its protagonist. Each woman craves things beyond her reach, and despite fame, adoration or wealth, never feels complete. Men are enablers, rarely cast in a positive light – for every stable doctor or counsellor in the life of Nelly and her characters' lives there is an abusive client or a neglectful boyfriend.

It's a tough yet fascinating watch; as Arcan steadily unravels over her multiple narratives, ignored by the people around her, stunted by her own achievements, she becomes compelling in her helplessness, and you urge for a change for her.

Mackay is admirable in shifting from Arcan to escort to addict fleetingly while maintaining the same person at their core. Hair, outfits and physicality change, but her vulnerability remains. As we watch Nelly's escort persona quietly listen to her online reviews read proudly aloud by her co-workers, flickers of despair rise to surface, a different face to the confident performer witnessed just scenes before in a hotel bedroom.

To read Arcan's work after her death is to see laid bare the author's unhappiness. Where her first novel *Whore* is an unflinching, unerotic account of sex work with a protagonist caged by fear and anger, her final, *Exit*, is the fictional account of a paraplegic woman who remains bedridden after a failed suicide attempt. Mailing the draft of *Exit* to her publisher days before hanging herself in her Montreal apartment, Arcan's last story is a haunting final chapter about disappointment and depression and received global acclaim for its dark power.

In interviews Émond speaks openly about her pain when she learned of the novelist's suicide, and the intrigue she felt when watching a woman so seemingly superficial with bleached hair, breast implants and heavy make up, allow herself to be vulnerable in the public eye.

Speaking with the people in Arcan's life, Émond quickly learned that she had spun different truths for different boyfriends, friends and editors, using these clashing accounts of her subject to create a whole person for it would seem the first time.

A straightforward adaptation of one of Arcan's novels wouldn't have the same effect – her anxieties and confessions are there but muddled with her fiction. By unpicking the stories of Arcan, Émond has found a truly original depiction of a highly regarded Canadian author and personality.

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