



Eldorado

With: Bouli Lanners, Fabrice Adde, Philippe Nahon, Didier Toupy, Françoise Chichery, Stefan Liberski, Baptiste Isaia, Jean-Jacques Rausin, Renaud Rutten, Jean-Luc Meekers.

By [LESLIE FELPERIN](#)

A heroin addict and the lonely car dealer whom he just tried to burgle end up taking an eventful road trip together in Belgian thesp-helmer Bouli Lanners' small but damn-near perfectly formed serio-comedy "Eldorado." Like Lanners' previous, "Ultranova," newest pic tracks quirky, troubled characters dwelling in the fabulously flat East Belgian landscape, and strikes a just-so balance between absurdist humor and sadness. Yet pic never puts a wrong foot forward in the direction of sentimentality or cliché. "Eldorado" won't exactly reap B.O. gold for offshore distribs, but will certainly have conquests on the fest circuit.

Beefy Yvan (helmer Lanners himself), who deals in big, imported American cars, comes home one night to find his house has been broken into. He catches the thief, a scrawny guy named Elie, whom Yvan pegs straight away as a junkie, hiding under his bed and refusing to come out, claiming (falsely) he has a knife.

Eventually, Yvan and Elie strike a deal: Yvan won't call the cops if Elie just leaves. But a destitute Elie, who swears he's been clean for two weeks, is flat broke, so Yvan eventually offers to drive him to his parents' house near the French border.

As the two take to the road (not an especially long one, by American road movie standards) in Yvan's 1979 Chevy, pic's middle half hour gracefully ratchets up the comedy through a series of increasingly ridiculous mishaps. First the twosome are saved from car trouble by a weirdo (Philippe Nahon, best known abroad for his work with Gaspar Noé) who collects cars that have been involved in fatal accidents, and who insists on getting the duo drunk.

An inebriated Yvan falls asleep at the wheel, despite some ingeniously silly preventative measures on Elie's part, and they end up crashing and in need of a tow from two even more bizarre characters in an RV.

When they arrive at Elie's parents to a far-from-warm welcome, pic's tone grows increasingly melancholy by exactly the same tick-by-tick degrees it had nurtured hilarity earlier. It's eventually explained why the seemingly usually curmudgeonly Yvan is bothering to help out Elie at all, a plot point that cruder hands might have milked for more pathos, but is unfussily revealed here.

The final coda is darker still. Without ever tipping into full-on tragedy, conclusion offers a well-judged, *tristesse*-suffused dying fall, like a good short story, but one that offers no false hopes of redemption. More uplift might have made pic more commercial, but would have betrayed the spirit of the piece.

Thesps' spot-on comic chemistry is showcased by Lanners' crisp helming, which lets the action often unfold in long shots, and sometimes slightly off-center ones. Rhythm, in both the dialogue and the editing, is note-perfect throughout, and running time a brisk 81 minutes.

Lensing by Jean-Paul de Zaeytijd, who also shot "Ultranova," caresses the broad flatlands, which looks prairie-like in its expansive, austere flatness, but comes pockmarked by ugly little corners, such as the abandoned caravan park seen here, or the graffitied underside of a bridge where a roadside food stand hosts a key scene. Twangy guitar score by Renaud Mayeur evokes the road-movie mood, with just a hint of ironic parody.

Camera (color, widescreen), Jean-Paul de Zaeytijd; editor, Ewin Ryckaert; music, Renaud Mayeur; set designer, Paul Rouschop; costume designer, Elise Ancion; sound (Dolby Digital), Olivier Hespel, Marc Bastien; sound designer, Marc Bastien. Reviewed at the Cannes Film Festival (Directors Fortnight), May 18, 2008. Running time: 81 MINS.