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FILM REVIEW; The Not-Quite-True Story of Divorce and Its Truly Painful Consequences

By **STEPHEN HOLDEN**

The jiggling, swerving camera that pokes its nose into the troubled lives of three children in Geoffrey Enthoven's film "Children of Love" is so restless that you sometimes wish you could reach your hand into the screen and steady it. That camera's hyperactivity contributes to the nervous, disconsolate mood of Mr. Enthoven's first feature, which started out as a documentary about the effects of divorce on a single family but became fictionalized when the designated family declined to take part.

This dour little Belgian movie zeroes in on an unpleasant reality. When grownups separate and divorce, their behavior is often just as childish as that of their offspring. And it recognizes that what keeps many divorced couples at loggerheads is money. As for those offspring, it suggests that divorce destroys their sense of security as surely as Humpty Dumpty's fall left him permanently shattered despite the best efforts of all the king's men. Even when most of pieces can be put together, some will be missing.

Two of those three children -- 12-year-old Michaël (Michael Philpott) and 9-year-old Winnie (Winnifred Vigilante) -- are the products of the first marriage of Natalie (Nathalie Stas), an impulsive, bitter young woman, to Olivier (Olivier Ythier), a humorless, hotheaded know-it-all and control freak who owns a garage. Unable to put up with his domineering ways, Nathalie divorced him and married Renaud (Jean-Louis Leclercq), an older demolitions expert with whom she had a third child, Aurélie (Fauve De Loof), before divorcing him, too.

Now a giggly 5-year-old angel with golden ringlets, Aurélie seems the least wounded of the three because she is so young. Renaud meanwhile has become involved with a beautiful but demanding woman half his age. Although the movie makes clear what went wrong between Nathalie and Olivier, the problems of her second marriage are left frustratingly unclarified.

The movie, which opens today at the Film Forum in the South Village, follows the six main characters as they mope through a typical weekend in which the children are parceled off to their respective fathers while Natalie lets off steam with her girlfriends.

Winnie, the most obviously unhappy child, is a borderline catatonic who is seeing a therapist her mother can barely afford. Michaël, who worships his father and seems to have many of his traits, blames Renaud for his parents' divorce. In the complicated logistics of visitation, the children spend two weekends a month with their respective fathers.

The movie's stylistic conceit is to pretend to be a documentary by having the three parents and children interviewed separately by a camera crew. It should go without saying that the children, when facing the camera, aren't exactly spontaneous.

For all the accuracy with which "Children of Love" depicts the stresses of divorce, it leaves a sour aftertaste since it's obvious that the filmmaker's intrusion on these unhappy people, fictional or not, only further worsens their discomfort and their difficulty communicating.

CHILDREN OF LOVE

Written (in French, with English subtitles) and directed and edited by Goeffrey Enthoven; director of photography, Gerd Schelfhout; music by Das Pop; art directors, Jean-Pierre Temmermann and Raf Rayntjes; produced by Colette Buchet-Charlet, "L'Abre de Vie" Foundation and ASBL "Les Choeurs de Luis Mariano." At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Sixth Avenue, South Village. Running time: 87 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Fauve De Loof (Aurélie), Michael Philpott (Michaël), Winnifred Vigilante (Winnie), Jean-Louis Leclercq (Renaud), Nathalie Stas (Nathalie) and Olivier Ythier (Olivier).

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