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Off Jackson Avenue

A Goltzius Prods. presentation, in association with the Group Entertainment, of a Goltzius production. Produced by Michiel Pilgram. Executive producer, Gill Holland. Directed, written by John-Luke Montias.

With: Jessica Pimentel, Aya Cash, Stivi Paskoski, John-Luke Montias, Jun Suenaga, Gene Ruffini, Clem Cheung, Daniel Oreskes, Judith Hawking, Jim Tooley.
(English, Russian, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Japanese, Albanian dialogue)

By [RONNIE SCHEIB](#)

A Mexican woman sold into sexual slavery, a local car thief with dreams of respectability and a Japanese English-language teacher who moonlights as an assassin unknowingly race toward a single denouement across the international no-man's-land of Queens in "Off Jackson Avenue." John-Luke Montias' freewheeling multistrander sends three stories hurtling toward a collision all the more satisfying for being visible a mile off. Though pic is downbeat and defiantly low-budget, its laid-back absurdist tone and no-nonsense pacing make for an audio-visual delight. Unfortunately, lack of hooks or name thespians may relegate this indie gem to cable viewing.

Olivia (Jessica Pimentel), lured to New York from Mexico with the offer of a restaurant job, finds herself imprisoned in a clapboard bordello, forced to service a steady stream of johns (cue rapid-fire montage of sweaty, straining men). Her horror at her captors' cruel venality is matched by her incredulity at the passive acceptance displayed by the house's other enslaved playthings.

The house is one of a franchise run by Albanian pimp Milot (Stivi Paskoski), whose recent success has dethroned Chinese mob boss Eddie Chang (Clem Cheung) in the prostitution racket. Enter Tomo (Jun Suenaga), the Japanese hitman Chang has hired, much to the stammering awe of Chang's four young henchmen.

Multinational fruitcakes aside, Montias' version of Queens boasts its own fair share of pathetically realistic oddball natives: Joey (helmer Montias), a small-time car thief as gullible as he is self-deluded, bickers with his live-in uncle, Jack (Gene Ruffini), over the best methods to pursue upward mobility.

Montias, whose debut opus, "Bobby G Can't Swim," enjoyed considerable critical (if not commercial) success, has crafted another simple-seeming film about relatively ordinary people in jeopardy who make do with limited options. Olivia, cracking under constant exploitation, attacks her cop john (Jim Tooley) not with his bedside gun, but with the porcelain top of the jerry-rigged house toilet.

Unlike Quentin Tarantino's self-styled poseurs, Montias' characters lack even movie savvy, their options constrained by immediate circumstances and their own imaginations. Yet Montias endows his creations with a knack for taking off in unexpected directions within the most apparently circumscribed setups.

The ultimate coincidence pile-up -- which occurs "Off Jackson Avenue" -- unfolds with a precisely choreographed inevitability that still feels spontaneous. Even Joey, the designated wild card in the deck considering his ability to hijack any vehicle, never chooses the expected conveyance as pic careens towards wrap-up, ending somewhere between a whimper and a bang.

George Gibson's Super 16 lensing lends a quasi-documentary tactility to the proceedings.

Camera (color, Super 16-to-HD), George Gibson; editor, Michiel Pilgram; music, Ed Tomney; production designer, Tamar Gadish; art director, Elizabeth Ralston; costume designer, Sandra Alexandre; sound, Justin Gray; sound designer, Chen Harpaz; casting, Mary Clay Boland, Catherin Zambri. Reviewed at New York Latino Film Festival, July 24, 2008. Running time: 79 MIN.

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