

A Sobering Story of Sex Trafficking

Movies | Review of: *Holly*

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There aren't many words in "Holly," but there seems to be even less sunlight, or hope. While the issue of sex trafficking — specifically that of underage girls being kidnapped and smuggled around [Asia](#) — has become more widely reported in recent years, it's proven too bleak a topic for the movie screens until just the last few months. The most recent attempt, Marco Kreuzpaintner's "Trade," was so gratuitously manipulative and melodramatic that it stripped the topic of any weight or substance; it was essentially another horror film.

By contrast, "Holly" is a work of serious, contemplative outrage, an achievement that is as unsettling as it is true to the nature of its subject. It's difficult to imagine a movie studio volunteering the cash needed to create a work this brave in confronting real horrors — and sure enough, the closing credits attribute all of the movie's financing to a single source: Dr. Smadar Kort and her husband, Amit Kort. If the Korts were hoping to spend their money on a film that relentlessly confronts prostitution, underage sexual assault, and government-sponsored sex trafficking in Asia — funded mostly by Western tourists looking for prey — then "Holly" represents a wise investment.

For actor Ron Livingston, whom most audiences will recognize as the everyman slacker from "Office Space" and from his recurring role on "Sex and the City," "Holly" marks a dramatic triumph. He plays Patrick, a common American criminal who spends his days transporting and dealing illegal antiquities and his nights trying to cheat a gang of card sharps. When his motorcycle breaks down in Cambodia, he rents a room in a brothel and happens upon the girl who will change his life.

From the outset, Patrick seems aware of the prostitution racket, but it's not until he meets Holly (Thuy Nguyen), a Vietnamese girl sold by her family and shipped across the border by her handlers, that he realizes the true scope and depravity of the enterprise. The movie opens with Holly's attempted escape from her captors, following her as she is chased and caught by armed men, loaded on a truck, and returned to her madam, who promptly slaps her and warns that if she tries to escape again, she will be killed.

By the end of the movie, it's Patrick who will be running, no longer able to dismiss his outrage or turn a blind eye to the atrocities occurring seemingly around every corner. When Patrick meets Holly for the first time, just as another Westerner is ogling her, he is mortified to hear that girls like Holly (very young virgins) represent the industry's prized possessions. Scared for Holly, he buys her a bowl of soup and in the following days reaches out to be her friend.

When Holly disappears one day, Patrick launches what seems like a nationwide search, traveling from one back-alley operation to another, realizing along the way just how powerful and pervasive the industry is. On every block he encounters a new pimp, a new madam, a new houseful of girls who proposition him. In what is perhaps the film's most unnerving sequence, Patrick is approached by a boy no older than 10 and pulled by the hand to the back door of a small shack where he is propositioned by two young girls who look to be about the same age as the boy. The middle-aged man who opens the door tells Patrick that they're too young to have sex with him, but can do plenty else.

With material like this, director Guy Moshe could easily have crafted a straight horror film or shock spectacle, but he wisely goes down a different path. Without a hint of exaggeration or exploitation, we are introduced to scared and hopeless girls going through the seduction routine, violent thugs who hold the girls hostage, and depraved clients who brag about their conquests. The police don't escape unscathed, either; at one point, Holly is taken into custody, but the officer turns her over to another brothel, inflating the price because Holly is a foreigner without a family looking for her.

More than just a surface story, "Holly" inspires despair at multiple levels. Things seem all but hopeless for a girl who can't be saved from this cycle — even by an American packing \$100 bills. But beyond the title character's individual story, "Holly" constantly hints at a wider network of prostitution that operates freely on a daily basis, supported by local officials and an endless queue of foreign clients.

Most movies would be about this one man and this one girl, trying to break through. "Holly," which is hard to watch but even harder to forget, dares to ask the bigger question: What about the thousands of others?

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