

Delusions

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [November 1, 2000](#) issue

Dancer in the Dark (2000), directed by Lars von Trier

Nurse Betty (2000), directed by Neil LaBute

Dancer in the Dark is the most aesthetically brilliant film of the year, and it contains an unnerving naturalistic performance by Icelandic vocalist Bjork. But the film is spoiled by director and screenwriter Lars von Trier's need for a protracted soap-opera catastrophe.

Selma (played by Bjork) is a Czechoslovakian immigrant who works in a factory. Her impending blindness and her incessant daydreaming about musicals make her an occupational hazard. She saves every dime so that her son, who has the same disease, can have an eyesight-saving operation. But a despondent neighbor steals Selma's money, leading to tragedy upon tragedy.

Bjork is not a professional actress, and she has said the only way she could play Selma was to become her. She does. Her performance is disarming and raw, and she makes otherwise melodramatic moments come alive. Bjork can scream at the top of her lungs and not seem like she's overacting.

Von Trier shoots most of the film in a colorless cinema-verité style with a jumpy handheld camera. But every time Selma starts daydreaming about musicals, the colors become vibrant, the camera stationary. Selma sings, co-workers dance, people swing fishing poles in rhythm. It's an unnerving but staggeringly effective device; it uses the constraints of the musical to show the slow progression from Selma's casual escapism to her romanticized self-delusion.

But, as in his previous English-language feature, *Breaking the Waves*, von Trier aims to squeeze every last tear out of his audience by establishing a saintly figure and then leading her through hell. My eyes watered up, but I also felt a bit manipulated in the end.

Provocative Mormon moralist Neil LaBute's new film, *Nurse Betty*, has less in common with his previous wordy, angry and fascinating treatises on misanthropy (*In*

the Company of Men and *Your Friends and Neighbors*) than with the Coen brothers' *Fargo*. Like that film, *Nurse Betty* takes place in a bipolar universe where everyone is lovably quirky until they commit or are victimized by some quirky act of violence.

Scalping is the quirky violence in *Nurse Betty*. Betty (Renee Zellweger) is at home watching the soap opera that she is obsessively devoted to, *A Reason to Love*, when she sees two hit men discussing a shady deal with her husband, Del (Aaron Eckhart). After she watches one of them scalp Del, she goes into a dissociative state, believing that *A Reason to Love* is real and forgetting about her husband's fate.

Bloodshed occurs only once more in *Nurse Betty*, near the end. Between these bookends lies an enjoyable film. While *Dancer in the Dark* uses a woman confronted with a tragedy as a lead-in to a greater tragedy, LaBute uses Betty's misfortune and subsequent dissociation to savage comic effect. Betty runs into the cast of *A Reason to Love* at a posh Hollywood party, where she unwittingly convinces them that she's a method actress trying to get on the show. They play along with her, and she even gets a guest spot on the show, leading to a very confused Betty dealing with cameras and cue cards.

A hit man on Betty's trail named Charlie (Morgan Freeman) is a compelling counterpoint to Betty. Both characters are products of their delusions. Charlie thinks Betty is his perfect woman. Using only a photograph and a few facts, Charlie comes up with a complete picture of who he thinks Betty is. When he finally meets her, the bursting of his bubble leads to a revelation about another hit man--an appropriately strange ending to a quirky film.