

Little Joe [12A] 2019 | UK / Austria / Germany | 105 mins

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| UK release date | 21 February 2020 |
| Director | Jessica Hausner |
| Screenplay | Jessica Hausner, Géraldine Bajard |
| Cinematography | Martin Gschlacht |
| Music | Various |
| Cast | Emily Beecham (Alice); Ben Wishaw (Chris); Kit Connor (Joe); Leanne Best (Brittany); Lindsay Duncan (Psychotherapist); Kerry Fox (Bella); David Wilmot (Karl); Sebastian Hülk (Ivan) |

Austrian writer-director Jessica Hausner's (Lourdes, Amour Fou) first English language film is a sci-fi horror, and is far more satisfying than her previous foray into the same territory in her 2004 film Hotel.

Little Joe centres on a divorcee mother, Alice (Emily Beecham), a plant breeder at a company researching and developing new species of flowers; she and Chris (Ben Wishaw) are designing a plant – which she names Little Joe, after her teenage son (Kit Connor) – which, if bestowed with loving care, produces a scent that makes people happy. But after an incident involving a dog belonging to her colleague Bella (Kerry Fox), Alice begins to wonder about the effects of the plant's pollen on those who come into excessively close contact with it; not just Chris but her son Joe, who's very taken with a plant Alice secretly took home for him.

What ensues might just be categorised as a hybrid produced by crossing Invasion of the Body Snatchers with Little Shop of Horrors, though Hausner's film – cool, calm and wonderfully precise in the way it establishes and maintains a mood of unsettling ambiguity – is far subtler and less generic than such a description suggests. Since Bella has a history of mental turmoil, we, like Alice, might initially dismiss her theories about the plant's effects on the human brain as paranoia, but as the film progresses everyone's behaviour changes just enough to provoke the questions: are their professed emotions genuine, and are they really who we have always thought they were?

Alice herself changes, too, and because we increasingly view events through her eyes – though never entirely so – we are forced to ask ourselves whether she,

rather than Bella, is the one who is paranoid. After all, her son's sudden shift towards a more robust independence might be put down not to pollen infection but simply to his growing up; likewise Chris's more distant attitude towards her might easily be the consequence of her having rebuffed his amorous advances.

The script, by Hausner and Géraldine Bajard, shows an astute grasp of the psychological and social dynamics of the family, the workplace, of parenthood and of gender relations. Thanks to the inclusion of a psychotherapist Alice visits (Lindsay Duncan), certain issues to do with guilt and suppressed desire are made explicit, but not in a clunky or over-emphatic fashion; possibilities of interpretation are simply sown into the overall narrative, which is balanced precariously but pleasingly between the fantastic and the real, between the analytical and the evocative, between the seriously philosophical and the darkly comic.

All the performances, too, sustain this balance beautifully throughout, while Martin Gschlacht's crisp, fluid camerawork is at once elegant, eloquent and appropriately strange, ensuring that a potentially far-fetched premise makes for a consistently compelling mystery. The icing on the cake is Hausner's use of music by Japanese composer Teiji Ito, which is hauntingly dissonant and occasionally, in its use of percussion, shocking.

After: Geoff Andrew, Sight and Sound, 23 May 2019

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