

FILM REVIEW

Forbidden Love Turns Two Girls Into Murderers

By JANET MASLIN

"Next time I write in this diary, Mother will be dead," wrote Pauline Parker, a 15-year-old living in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 1952. "How odd — yet how pleasing." Making good on that promise, Pauline and her school friend Juliet Hulme went on an outing with Honora Parker, Pauline's mother, and bludgeoned her to death with a brick stuffed in a stocking. Just before this fateful stroll in the woods, the three—some had stopped to enjoy tea.

Like Leopold and Loeb, their American counterparts, Pauline and Juliet scandalized their countrymen in ways that have not yet been forgotten. They were smugly superior; they were caught in the grip of illicit passion; they were capable of murdering an innocent relative for no good reason. On top of this, they broke more serious taboos. They were genteel schoolgirls who fell in love with each other and, goaded by that love, committed a terminally unladylike crime.

What sent them over the edge? Although Pauline's diary became a matter of public record when the girls went to trial, it left many unanswered questions. No less arrogantly delusional than Leopold and Loeb, Pauline and Juliet had come to inhabit a dream world populated by imaginary royalty and teen-age fave raves (they shared a huge crush on the singer Mario Lanza), who sometimes acted as stand-ins for the adults in their lives. With ebullient imagination, they invented a secret, mischievous universe open only to "heavenly creatures" like themselves. Pauline used that phrase to describe Juliet and herself.

"Heavenly Creatures" is Peter Jackson's effort to explore that universe, mimicking the killers' school-girl daydreams in a whirl of giddy, all-consuming fantasy. Like Oliver Stone's "Natural Born Killers," it enters an insular, volatile world of high-hormone adolescence and captures its characters' scary detachment from reality. In keeping with its heroines' thoughts of secret gardens and giant butterflies, Mr. Jackson's film is virtually bloodless, looking fussily benign. But its exaggerated sweetness is every bit as chilling as more familiar masculine reveries about violence and irrational revenge.

Mr. Jackson, whose previous credits ("Bad Taste," "Dead Alive") are in the science-fiction and horror realm, gives "Heavenly Creatures" a visual extravagance to match its



Pierre Vinet/Miramax Films

Melanie Lynskey, left, and Kate Winslet in "Heavenly Creatures."

characters' excitement. Structured as a chronological account of the girls' growing friendship, it interjects flights of increasingly wild imagination into their story. Fascinatingly eccentric at first, the film loses some of its tension as it becomes evident that Mr. Jackson will not see beyond the killers' claustrophobic point of view.

This story went well beyond the film, which ends with a postscript after the crime. For instance, both girls disappeared after serving brief sentences, released under the condition that they never meet again. And Juliet recently made international headlines when she was revealed to be Anne Perry, a successful writer of mystery novels.

Aside from questions about the story's aftermath, "Heavenly Creatures" leaves gaps about the objective facts of the crime, since it deliberately confines itself to a subjective viewpoint. That's surprising, since Mr. Jackson has brought an investigator's zeal to reconstructing this story, basing his screenplay on interviews with people who knew the girls and including Pauline's own observations. The film's actors apparently bear close resemblances to the real figures in this famous case, but the film's realism doesn't go much beyond that.

Stylish and eerily compelling before it overplays its campy excesses, "Heavenly Creatures," which opens today in New York and in other cities next Wednesday, does have a feverish intensity to recommend it. Mr. Jackson elicits a particularly unsettling performance from Melanie Lynskey, the sullen-looking newcomer who comes to life in the presence of haughtier, more supercilious Juliet (Kate Winslet, another disturbingly effective actress). The film viscerally understands why quiet, awkward Pauline falls so madly in love with the more daring Juliet, whose upper-class parents have left her free to indulge in an active fantasy life. The Hulmes's garden, where the

HEAVENLY CREATURES

Written (with Frances Walsh) and directed by Peter Jackson; director of photography, Alun Bollinger; edited by Jamie Selkirk; music by Peter Dasant; production designer, Grant Major; produced by Jim Booth; released by Miramax Films. Running time: 98 minutes. This film is rated R.

WITH: Melanie Lynskey (Pauline Parker), Kate Winslet (Juliet Hulme), Sarah Peirse (Honora Parker), Diana Kent (Hilda Hulme), Clive Merrison (Henry Hulme) and Simon O'Connor (Herbert Rieper).

girls hatch their schemes, is the real place where the girls played and attests to Mr. Jackson's meticulous attention to detail.

On a loonier level, Mr. Jackson also disguises extras as life-size clay figures to flesh out the girls' private mythology (there is even a clay Orson Welles) and executes tricks like sending his camera racing through the interior of a sand castle. Weirdly ingenious until they become exhausting, such methods overpower the film's humbler figures even more than they have to. The girls' parents (with Diana Kent and Sarah Peirse affecting and well contrasted as Juliet's and Pauline's respective mothers), but the film would have delved deeper if it rescued them from two-dimensional caricature.

"Heavenly Creatures" reaches one pinnacle of subjective madness when Juliet's garden morphs magically into the "Fourth World" in which the girls think they belong, and another when Pauline is finally sent to a psychiatrist. "But she's always been a normal, happy child," her mother insists, in a scene that is played as giddy caricature. "Heavenly Creatures" knows what it means to deem that kind of comment reason enough for murder.

"Heavenly Creatures" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes brief, disturbing violence and sexual situations.