

## The Caveman's Valentine

Samuel L. Jackson, ever since his amazing breakthrough as a cold-stone junkie in *Jungle Fever* (1992), has been one of our most consistently watchable actors, even when he was in material that abused his talent (*Deep Blue Sea*, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*). As the "Caveman" in *The Caveman's Valentine*, he gets to go over the top and way beyond as Romulus Ledbetter, classical musician turned paranoid homeless guy living in a New York City park.

Romulus, who has lost his career and family to delusional ravings, has his valentine delivered in the frozen form of a homeless drifter perched in a tree outside his cave in the park. Convinced by his own internal demons that the dead boy, Scotty, was murdered, he looks to track down the man he senses is responsible, David Leppenraub (Colm Feore), a snide art photographer of eroto-sanguinary tastes. Spurned by the police--including his own daughter (Aunjaune Ellis)--he aims to piece together how the boy died, his own logic and intuition contesting with the vivid nightmares of his schizophrenia and visions of his ex-wife (Tamara Tunie), both guiding and chiding him.

Romulus continually sees fearsome visions of swirling seraphs (effectively created by production designer Robin Standefer) and reacts to flashing color beams, which he attributes to his imaginary adversary Stuyvesant. Yet he was once a consummate artist--a pianist and a composer--and that orderly part of his mind surfaces enough for him to try and work out the puzzle of Scotty's death.

Made up in a grungy greatcoat and sporting massive, salt-and-pepper dreadlocks, Jackson is a sight to behold--scary and fierce and forceful all at once. His eyes flame with menace and fear, his voice can rage just like those occasional folks one sees in urban streets talking with themselves, yet he brings nuance to Ledbetter, too, and touches of fellow feeling. This tour de force is no walk in the park.

Guiding Jackson in this out-sized role is director Kasi Lemmons, very confidently making only her second feature. She teamed memorably with Jackson in her debut picture *Eve's Bayou*, one of the best received independent films of 1997. Backing up the effective switching between gritty New York scenes and lurid fantasies in the film is the classical jazz played by Terence Blanchard, representing Ledbetter's retreats into sanity. Only near the end of the picture, when the story becomes a rather conventional whodunit does Lemmons' control weaken somewhat, along with the script by George Dawes Green (based on his own novel of the same name). Yet at its best--with Samuel L. acting like crazy--it is an intriguing character study pulled off by an actor who commands the screen.

(March 2001)