Here is Kino Ken's review of the dvd release of *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight*.

South Africa 2024 color 99 minutes live action feature drama in English
Paeony Pictures Production / Rose and Oaks Media Production / Don't Let's Go LLC Producers: Paul Buys, Embeth Davidtz, and Helena Spring
a Sony Pictures Classics dvd release

8 of a possible 20 points ** = a confused and confusing movie

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

1 Direction: Embeth Davidtz
0 Editing: Nicholas Costaras
1 Cinematography: Willie Nel
Stills Photography: Coco Van Oppens
1 Lighting Colorist: Craig Simonetti
Special Visual Effects: Nicholas Costaras (Supervisor)
0 Screenplay: Embeth Davidtz, based on the book by Alexandra Fuller
Music Recording: Thando Magwaza
1 Music: Chris Letcher
1 Production Design: Anneke Dempsey
Set Dressing: Laré Birk

Costume Design: Monique Lamprecht

2 Sound

Sound Effects: Michael Broomberg, Daniel Isaacs, Renier van Niekirk

Dialogue Editing: Kerry Wallendorf

Casting: Nicholas Campbell and Jessica Wolhuter

1 Acting

0 Creativity

8 total points

Cast: Lexi Venter (j)* ("Bobo"), Embeth Davidtz (Nicola Fuller, Bobo's mom), Zikhona Bali (Sarah, a Fuller maid), Anina Reed (Vanessa Fuller, Bobo's sister), Shilubana N Fumani (Jacob, Sarah's husband), Rob van Vuuren (Tim Fuller), Benjamin Ashby (Martin), Blake Rose Backos (Sharnell), Avumile Bavuma (Cecily), Ilana Cilliers (Jilly), Dylan Clausing (Medic #1), Andreas Damm (Brightlight), Ivor Davidtz (The Dude), Michelle Davidtz (The Dude's Wife), Zyx de Melo (Harry), Judy Ditchfield (Grandmother), Stepan S du Plessis (Policeman #1), Rene Duffey (Farmer Wife No. 1), Deon Ferreira (George), Paisley-Gray Fine (Charlie), Ricardo Genesis (Lucky), Anthony Grewe (Medic #2), Lara Hattingh (Farmer Wife #2), Rigardt Hug (Policeman #4), Craig Jackson (Farmer #1), Tessa Jubber (Aunt Sannie), Malachi Kaluw (j) (Oldest Compound Boy), Charles Kies (Farmer #2), Martelize Kolver (Margie), Edwin Lekgwate (Prisoner #3), Banele Majola (j) (Youngest Compound Boy), Shawn Manamela (Henry), Donovan Margocszi (Rhodesian Soldier), Ronald Mkwanazi (Samuel), Fezile Mpela (Charlie), Mudi Mudau (Penny), Pumla Ndlazi (Maggie), Carel Nel (Rob), Siyanda Nhlapo (Policeman #3), Junior Nkosi (Peter), Lwazi Ntshangase (Prisoner #1), Gontse Ntshegang (Maria), Albert Pretorius (Uncle Anton), Sello Ramolahloane (Mac), Kagiso Rathebe (Club Barman), Hendie Schoeman (Policeman #2), Ayanda Seoka (Beauty), Nqobile Sipamla (Mabel), Sandile Skhosana (Jeremiah), Scott David Sole (Duncan), Peter Terry* (Grandfather), Logan Venter (Logan), Thuthuka Vilakazi (Police Constable / Prisoner #2), Lexey Anne Wild (j) (Baby Olivia), Lylah Rose Wild (j) (Baby Olivia), Kara du Toit (Farmer's Wife)

Despite a formidably intriguing title, *Don't Let's Go To the Dogs Tonight* offers little insight into the lives, beliefs, and backgrounds of characters it

chooses to focus on. The story is set in the waning days of British-ruled Rhodesia. A national election brings to power the demonstrably disastrous administration of Marxist Robert Mugabe. These dramatic background events are filtered through the narrow viewpoint of a seven-year-old girl of English ancestry. Making for extremely shallow treatment of an ongoing civil war and electoral politics generated by that conflict. It further compels viewers to assume the dysfunctional Fuller family is representative of colonial British families in Rhodesia. Such is hardly the case.

Bobo, a seven-year-old spoiled brat serving as authorial mouthpiece, is the daughter of plantation owners Tim and Nicola Fuller. She has an older teen sister whose maternal instincts, sensitivity to protocol, and tenderness toward animals is starkly at odds with her mother's domineering selfishness and racism. Bobo's unfortunately drawn more to Nicola's belligerent, dictatorial attitude than to Vanessa's tamer delicacy about manners and social status. With father Tim mostly absent on scouting duties and mother Nicola increasingly devoted to time with a bottle, the younger Fuller girl spends as much time as possible with maid Sarah. Who unfortunately tends to inflate an already massive self-importance in the child.

This deliberate substitution of herself for Bobo's own mother endangers Sarah's life. For native rebels don't look kindly on her catering to a white youngster's caprices.

The consequence is predictable. It shakes up Bobo's routine and drives Nicola into paranoia, a condition intensifying her hostility and disdain for Rhodesia's underclass members. Unable to deal with election results empowering a black majority for the first time, Bobo's mother retreats into alternating denial and verbal aggression directed towards "trespassers" on Fuller property.

However, her spouse and Vanessa are more realistic. They know black Zimbabweans are post-election rulers of the land. The future for British transplants is bleak. Staying put would likely lead to catastrophe. At the very least, it shoves them into a prominent targets category.

These changes are little comprehended by this story's narrator. She fails to see change coming and only modifies her uppity behavior after a scathing diatribe delivered by Sarah's sister. That, coupled with increasingly irrational behavior on the part of Mother and return to the homestead by Father, causes her to reevaluate the progressively toxic environment in which she finds herself.

While the movie might have worked well had it centered on corruption and loss of innocence in a child trapped amid political and social turmoil, the character of Bobo works against such a conventional story arc. Bobo exhibits no trace of purity, either in terms of cleanliness or naïveté. A premature smoker, habitual rider of a motorbike with a pellet gun slung over one shoulder, tinkerer with live grenades, and vociferous curser whenever something displeases her, this second-generation colonial is more demonic imp than cherub. She ill fits the mold of a protagonist, being much more comfortably settled in that of an antagonist causing trouble for almost everyone she encounters. A sudden reversion to courtesy and hygiene late in the picture is unconvincing. Though it might be traceable to growing paternal influence as idolization of Mother seems ever less rewarding.

Nonetheless, Lexi Venter's superb performance is the one consistently riveting ingredient in an egregiously edited motion picture. Marred by excessive obscenities, both verbal and physical, Embeth Davidtz's debut as a director is further damaged by erratic manipulation of chronology, making the passage of screen time very difficult for audiences to measure. What is supposed to have transpired over the course of a couple weeks becomes a confused jumble due to a penchant for injecting blackouts into transitions. Lacking any semblance of straightforward narrative and jumping over unspecified time intervals repeatedly, DON'T LET'S GO TO THE DOGS TONIGHT is formally like a jigsaw puzzle with numerous pieces gone completely awol.

What appears to be its main theme is utter incompetence and arrogance of white racists attempting to maintain supremacy over restless black servants. Packaged as a guilt trip for Caucasian imperialist survivors and sympathizers, Davidtz's screed against the British Empire is wildly overrated in terms of artistic achievement or even as competent visual storytelling. Most characters are mere stereotypes: lecherous uncle, overbearing alcoholic mother, absentee father reluctant to exercise authority or discipline, figure-obsessed teen girl, wild yet perceptive underage cynic in the tradition of *Paper Moon*'s Addie Loggins.

Embeth Davidtz's naturalistic rendering of Nicola Fuller might have been self-gratifying to the actress as an experiment in gratuitous exhibitionism. It signally failed to provide any clue about what drew young Tim Fuller to her in the first place. Or why she felt so detached from any emotional involvement with her living offspring. A subplot about a third child with an aborted lifespan due to

Bobo's negligence makes a brief and less-than-persuasive appearance about two-thirds of the way through the action. It's probably supposed to explain Nicola's behavior. However, parachuting such tragedy into proceedings so belatedly causes it to lose significance and impact. Especially when only Bobo seems heavily influenced by it and then only for a brief period.

As the movie progresses forward and downward, bleakness overruns whatever saving black humor or cheeriness might offer respite. With mother a candidate for the sanitarium, father finding comfort in an off-color ditty with two socially transgressive daughters and Bobo withdrawing into an imaginary world where Sarah has morphed into a Zimbabwean queen, *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs* concludes in total absurdity.

Too bad. A more incisive screenplay and a less biased political slant could have generated a truly moving look at how a family navigates successfully through shifting power transfers.

Sound recording captures more African reality than dialogue here.

Since views show us South African rather than Zimbabwean landscapes, another layer of artifice is added by lighting and cinematography capturing the essence of the former rather than the latter countryside.

Chris Letcher's choral music would have been more instructive if subtitles had been provided onscreen. Edited lyrics of British pop hits contemporaneous with the movie's events are suspect. Do they really convey intended anti-imperial commentary? Or is that conclusion only due to biased selectivity in choosing which words to make audible?

A screenplay devoid of a single memorable line is no grand attainment. Nor is a welter of cussings from a youngster incapable of understanding their meanings either entertaining or instructive for listeners.

Absolutely no one under the age of twenty-one should be advised to see this movie, which is both aesthetically and politically offensive. Adults will find production design and acting adequate. But the sole highlight here is Lexi Venter magically transforming a relentlessly unlikeable snot into a fascinatingly credible, though badly flawed, individual with a personality unique to herself.

This Sony Pictures Classics dvd release sports no bonus features. So you'll have to settle for what could best be called the Lexi Venter Premiere Showcase.