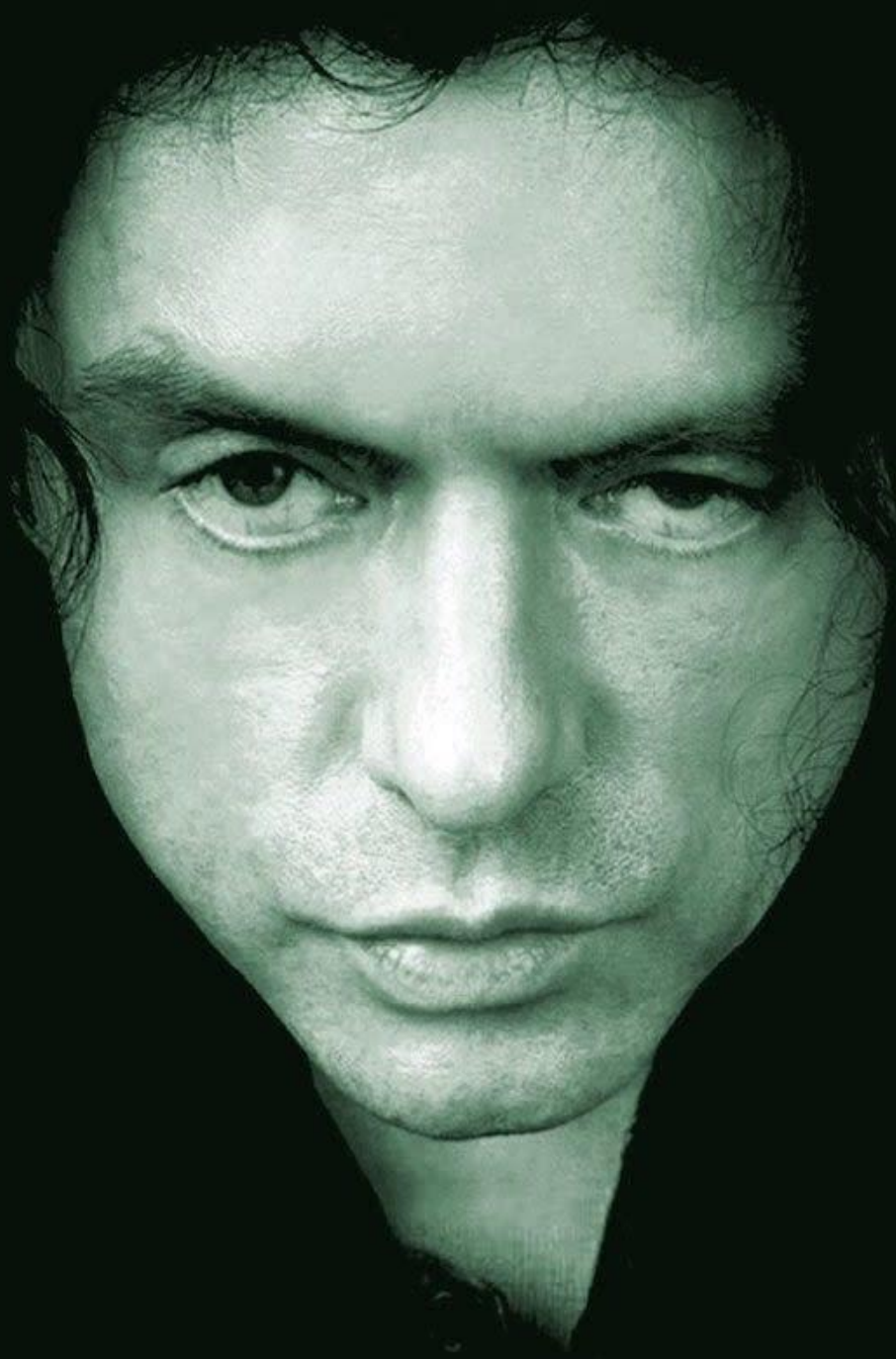


IN REVIEW ONLINE



FEATURES

KICKING THE CANON

DÉJÀ VU – 1

THE ROOM – 4

FILM REVIEWS

UMBERTO ECO: A LIBRARY OF

THE WORLD – 7

NIMONA – 8

RUN RABBIT RUN – 10

MILLIE LIES LOW – 11

KILLING – 12

RUBY GILLMAN: TEENAGE

KRAKEN – 13

LONELY CASTLE IN THE

MIRROR – 14

PRISONER'S DAUGHTER – 16

June 30, 2023

Volume 1, Issue 26



DÉJÀ VU

Tony Scott

Released in 2006 to mixed reviews and respectable, if unremarkable, box office, *Déjà Vu* was the third collaboration (of an eventual five) between director Tony Scott and superstar Denzel Washington. A slick, propulsive thriller, *Déjà Vu* has gradually amassed a reputation as one of Scott's very best works. Indeed, Scott's "late period," spanning from 2004's *Man on Fire* to his final film, 2010's *Unstoppable*, represents a kind of experimental ethos not found anywhere else in mainstream moviemaking, then or now. No one has much use for the term "vulgar auteurism" these days; that short-lived phenomenon tends to exist now only as early-2000s nostalgia and Twitter memes. But if anything at all came from that furious blast of Tumblr posts, Blogspot missives, and The Auteurs chat rooms, it was surely the elevation of Tony Scott's reputation. Less "respectable" than older brother Ridley, Tony spent much of his career fashioning mainstream blockbusters for uber producers like Jerry Bruckheimer, Don Simpson, and Joel Silver. After the disastrous release of Tony's debut, *The Hunger*, it was several years before he got a chance to helm another feature film. Of course, that film happened to be the epochal *Top Gun*, a decade-defining bit of popular culture that cemented Tony's reputation as a "style over substance" filmmaker.

Indeed, Tony never seemed attracted to prestige material like older brother Ridley, although this dichotomy doesn't seem to have mattered much to the brothers during Tony's lifetime. No doubt, both men were canny commercial animals, but while Ridley favored chiaroscuro lighting, classical montage, and the occasional tiny historical fiction, Tony was the impressionist, fashioning art objects out of mercenary material like *Beverly Hills Cop II* and *Days of Thunder*. As David Bordwell has written, Tony favored telephoto lenses

no matter what the composition, the use of which “tend to flatten space and abstract the image.” Obsessed with audacious, striking visuals, Tony overloaded the frame with reds and oranges and yellows. Bordwell likens Tony to Michael Bay, counting their works as the premier examples of “intensified continuity,” essentially quicker editing and unmotivated camera movements that cut up and slice through cinematic space. Bordwell writes, “*Man on Fire* contains at least 4100 shots, *Domino* over 5000, but perhaps we will never know just how many. Long passages are built out of multiple exposures, superimpositions, stop-and-go motion, and color shifts within a ‘shot.’ The cut ceases to be a firm boundary as layers float up and slip away.”

As many critics have noted, Tony was a trained painter before going to film school, and his images gradually take on the patina of action painting, particularly Pollock, all wild gestures and bold splashes as the frame quivers and destabilizes. *Man on Fire* and *Domino* are probably the purest examples of this practice (both have been compared to Stan Brakhage films), but *Déjà Vu* has persevered as a popular favorite because it splits the difference

between a sharp, character-driven screenplay and Tony’s own predilection for wildly abstracted imagery. The trick here, also used in his earlier *Enemy of the State*, is to contextualize the visual excesses via a set series of parameters. In both *Enemy* and *Déjà Vu*, Tony’s wildest indulgences are confined to satellite imagery. It just so happens that in *Déjà Vu*, it’s satellites that allow scientists, the FBI, and ATF agents to look into the past, zipping through a set point in time like a fully-rendered 3D version of Google maps. Steven Shaviro goes further than Bordwell, calling this a “disjunctive synthesis” of *old* and *new*. Shaviro continues: “a synthesis that is not only seen on the level of diegetic form (narrative structure vs. attractions), but also on that of the technological means of cinematic production (century-old hand-cranked cameras vs. heavy digital processing) and on that of the ways that technology is represented within the films (a love for older technologies such as trains vs. a radical immersion in video and Internet-based technologies.)” One of Tony’s earliest defenders, critic Ignatiy Vishnevetsky makes a similar point in a different way, writing that “Cinema is





supposed to be a medium of images — and yet... Scott's images are often impressionistic to the point of abstraction, 'unreadable,' arranged in ways that don't create any sense of a space or a chronology. The big, obvious gestures — causality-based montage, emphasized mise-en-scène, long unbroken camera movements — that are at the center of the most basic theories of classical filmmaking and criticism aren't central to his best films."

Of course, none of this talk of theory would matter if Tony's films weren't so massively entertaining. *Déjà Vu* has it all — action, suspense, deep state surveillance underpinnings, and a 21st-century take on Hitchcock's *Vertigo* that traverses space and time itself. Reteaming with his *Man on Fire* cinematographer Paul Cameron, and ably assisted by long-time editor Chris Lebenzon, Tony created one of the essential post-9/11 texts with *Déjà Vu*. After a white supremacist blows up a passenger ferry in New Orleans, ATF agent Doug Carlin (Washington) is called in to identify the type of explosives used in the attack. He winds up finding the corpse of a young woman who appears to have been murdered before the attack and then dumped to make it look like she was just another victim of the explosion. Impressed by his deductive abilities, the FBI invites Carlin to sit in on sessions utilizing a new program they refer to as "Snow White." The FBI claims that the program utilizes satellite imagery to render events within a certain window of time, always four and a half days in the past. It's not long before Carlin figures out that the device is not just computer

imagery, but an actual window into the past. He also gradually becomes obsessed with the female victim, identified as Claire Kuchever (Paula Patton). Using the Snow White program, the team eventually discovers the identity of the terrorist and arrests him. But Carlin is convinced that the machine can do more than simply identify a suspect after the fact — he wants to save Claire and stop the attack. So begins a complicated series of time-travel shenanigans, as Carlin first sends a note into the past, and then himself.

For his part, Tony seems most interested in visualizing Carlin's sneak peeks into the past, and events from the beginning of the film take on a new significance as "future" Carlin begins interacting with his own past. It's intricate and complicated, but Tony and his screenwriters keep the twisty plot machinations clear and linear. On a narrative level, Carlin's obsession with Claire almost threatens to turn creepy, but Washington's aw-shucks charm and matinee idol good looks keep things pretty firmly in "romantic" territory. It's a modern love story, mediated by surveillance and law enforcement, but *real* nonetheless. As Vischnevetsky writes, "Scott was an artist — specifically, he was a popular artist, one who worked in popular genres and idioms. He wasn't a stealth intellectual. He wasn't subversive." For all his obsessive attention to layered, stacked images and wild, superimposed frames, Tony was a proud entertainer who believed in the power of pulp. His unpretentious temperament is sorely missed in today's cinematic landscape. Better an overload of ostentatious visual ideas than the dearth we are faced with now. — **DANIEL GORMAN**

THE ROOM

Tommy Wiseau



Twenty years after its release, Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* has an enduring cultural foothold that few actually good films can match. Of those released in its year, only *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* and *Kill Bill Vol. 1* — a Best Picture winner based on the most valuable IP for nerds and a Quentin Tarantino joint, respectively — can really be said to occupy a larger place in the public consciousness, though even they can't match the ubiquity of Wiseau at repertory cinemas across the country. While a screening of a 2003 film like, say, Johnnie To's *Running on Karma* might be a once-in-a-decade event in most major cities, and *Return* will reliably screen yearly, *The Room* plays once a month in some cities. The only movie easier to see theatrically is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

What makes this dominance over midnight showtimes frustrating is that *The Room* sucks, and is beloved *because* it sucks. Cataloging its deficiencies or recounting its ridiculous plot is unnecessary, with every notable moment (read: nearly every scene) having been taken out of context and circulated as memes, seemingly just as funny each and every time to legions

of fans. There's Wiseau's melodramatic exclamation that Lisa is tearing him apart, a ludicrous football scene, and reference to "me underwears." The film's sex scenes play like Showtime softcore warped through a layer of accidental dream logic, and God help anyone named Mark, cursed to be greeted with "Oh, hi" for the rest of time. The total incompetence of *The Room's* script, production, and, most of all, its performances is easy to laugh at. Frustration with the film's popularity is not meant to deny that it's funny or to insist that a case of beer and a copy of the film wasn't a great way to spend a night in your buddy's dorm room a decade ago. It was, and it still is. But the popularity of laughing at *The Room* is symptomatic of a larger trend in movie fandom: the cult of "so bad it's good," which flattens the individual character of all such films into one homogenous, irony-primed whole.

The Room is far from the first movie (or the most recent) to be treated as a cult object because it's laughably terrible, though it has surpassed even Ed Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space* as the de facto king of the bad movie experience. While audiences have

KICKING THE *CANON*

been laughing at bad movies since the dawn of cinema, and *Mystery Science Theater 3000* brought the experience to nationwide cable in the '90s, *The Room* reignited the passion for this content in the 21st century. Over the past decade, podcasts about bad movies like *How Did This Get Made* and *The Flophouse* have largely been more popular than ones about good movies; event screenings of movies like *Troll 2* or *Samurai Cop* have been ubiquitous at some theater chains; and in 2006, the *Mystery Science Theater* guys started RiffTrax, audio commentary versions of their usual schtick available online (and also sometimes playing in cinemas). "So bad it's good" is an industry now, to the point that any given movie has more of a chance at a life beyond its release if it is terrible. Much like *The Room*, 2017's *Gotti* is better remembered than plenty of perfectly fine movies from its year. There's nothing wrong with laughing at bad movies, really, but it is no doubt a simplistic, incurious form of movie fandom, if not always mean-spirited. Worse, this cult will routinely rope in films that aren't bad, but just old or made on the cheap; in addition to *The Room*, *Birdemic*, and *Plan 9*, RiffTrax

has produced tracks for *Mothra*, *Starship Troopers*, *Carnival of Souls*, and, somehow, *Night of the Living Dead*. The spirit of laughing at movies proves so infectious that it can't help but infect how some audiences have begun to treat all movies as objects to riff on.

At the center of *The Room's* cult is its creator, Tommy Wiseau, who shows up to *Room* screenings to sign autographs and sell his brand of underwear. Much has been written about his mysterious nature, strange looks, and unplaceable accent. Perhaps not enough has been said about Wiseau as a grifter. Last decade, an Adam Rosen piece in *The Atlantic* suggested that bad filmmakers like Wiseau and Wood should be considered outsider artists, those whose work is not only outside the mainstream, but so out of touch with the conventions of classically good art that it registers as its own category, successful on its own terms. But while Wood fits the bill, as do prolific weirdos like Neil Breen and Damon Packard, Wiseau is a desperate wannabe, insistent that you were supposed to laugh at his film all along and satisfied with trying to find other business ventures in lieu of producing new work, of which he's made very little. If costar Greg Sestero's account of the film's production, as detailed in his non-fiction book *The Disaster Artist*, is to be believed, Wiseau, whom Sestero met in acting class and who mysteriously came up with six million dollars to fund a movie, comes off at the very least as a bad friend, and at worst as a megalomaniacal director impulsively steering the production into utter disarray — one such whim included the idea to film the movie simultaneously on digital and on film with two cameras, for no discernable reason. Sets were dismantled and rebuilt the next day. Cast and crew changes were nearly as regular as new terrible ideas from the director. Sestero even compares Wiseau to Tom Ripley, a man with seemingly no past who takes on identities to benefit himself at the expense of others. The production of *The Room* recalls horror stories about



working with demanding auteurs like Hitchcock or Kubrick, but instead of producing one of the great works of the film canon, Wiseau put all this abuse into a legendary piece of shit.

The film version of *The Disaster Artist* is much kinder to Wiseau, portraying the aforementioned set troubles as the delightful quirks of a passionate weirdo. Maybe it's easier to sell the legend; maybe wannabe auteur James Franco sees Wiseau as a kindred spirit. Given that Wiseau was made to pay damages to the makers of a documentary whose release he attempted to block because it wasn't kind enough to the director and his work, it's also possible that the same attitude infected the making of *The Disaster Artist*. Whatever the cause, the film bears the mark of a filmmaker becoming too friendly with his subject to make anything approaching honest. Were this a sensible world, *The Disaster Artist* would be the (cowardly) last word on *The Room*, but Bob Odenkirk recently revealed a remake is in the works.

If a remake is seeking to make a more dramatically competent version of *The Room*, it's worth looking at what's there behind the baffling filmmaking and the "oh hi, doggie" line readings. When people laugh at *The Room*, are they only laughing at the incompetence of one film or does it in some way operate as parody? The plot of *The Room* is not so different from that of any number of soapy dramas. It's a film about infidelity, domestic violence, questioned allegiances, and any number of common tropes. To approach it generously, Wiseau's incompetence — complemented by his amateur cast — arguably strips away the trappings of good moviemaking to reveal that plenty of normal movies, especially those middlebrow adult dramas always out of favor with young people, are worthy of derision. Had Friedberg and Seltzer ever made a film called *Drama Movie*, it's not hard to imagine it would bear resemblance to *The Room*. But remaking *The Room* is a fool's errand, a one-joke project that misses what's really underneath all the hilarious garbage: the foul, misogynistic cry of a buffoon desperate for Hollywood's attention. Twenty years after the release of *The Room*, it's time to move on. — **CHRIS MELLO**





UMBERTO ECO: A LIBRARY OF THE WORLD

Daide Ferrario

In his *New York Times* review of the English translation (by William Weaver) of *The Name of the Rose*, Franco Ferrucci described Umberto Eco's idea of culture as "a channel of interdisciplinary exchange rather than a provider of certainties or a chapel for hermetic and initiatory rites." Though that may be true, hermetic orders fascinated Eco throughout his life, playing both a major role in that very novel, as well as making up a large part of his personal library. Filmmaker Daide Ferrario once recorded Eco amongst his works — his prized possessions being those works that have been both "proven wrong" and those that promise esoteric wisdom — for a video installation piece in 2015. Shortly after, he died, spawning a slew of remembrances and tender words for the intellectual powerhouse who knew that his big ideas must come in appealing stories and addicting laughter. And, though he is gone, his library of more than 50,000 works remains, representing a life's work of curiosity and obsession. It's to this 2015 footage, some of the last recordings of Eco, as well as this vast library, that Ferrario returns in his new *Umberto Eco: A Library of the World*.

The documentary itself sidesteps a predictable info-bomb format and instead glides through the various preoccupations of Eco's career. Each section is delivered with whimsical panache, as an actor introduces the context of each of Eco's highlighted ideas only to be replaced by archival footage of Eco himself mirroring or further explaining these subjects. While Eco's buoyant presence is addictive and his threads of thoughts are fascinating to follow, a never-ending stream of actors parading through library (both Eco's and not) aisles, which inevitably cuts back to archival footage (either Italian TV or the equivalent of C-SPAN's *Book TV* from the '90s) and secondhand stories of Eco courtesy of friends and family shot in cozy and bibliophilic spaces, nevertheless makes the material more suitable for radio programming. There are exceptions, such as the visual accompaniment of dog testicles free-floating in a jar beside Frederik Ruysch's *Thesaurus Anatomicus*, a perverse joke considering the morbid contents of the wonderfully illustrated text that Eco's grandson describes as his childhood fascination. This, and the renderings of Eco's illustrations for the labyrinths and characters of *The Name of the Rose*, provides the only visual break from rows and rows of books. Though many potential viewers of a documentary about Umberto Eco would likely jump

at the opportunity to look at books — individual, beautifully bound, curiously illustrated books — *A Library of the World* seems only interested in books as things that are both old and many.

So, although the documentary shies away from a paint-by-numbers talking head format, the filmmaking instincts here are still all-too-familiar. That said, Eco's words are indeed easy to follow, and his various lectures, both from the aforementioned TV broadcasts and Ferrario's own footage, are entrancing. Eco does arrive at one topic again and again — an idea that sticks close to the theme of libraries or any sort of organized knowledge. With the invention of the Internet — or perhaps just computers, as it's their storage capacity and data-retrieval capabilities that end up on Eco's chopping block — knowledge has simply become too loud and too much for us mere mortals to use. Eco yearns for the days when three books on a topic, certainly not enough to master material, would at least yield a possible way for a human to engage with what he terms our *vegetal memory*. Eco's possible three books and your possible three books may yield different recollections on a subject, but your conversation would bear potent fruit. But, an infinite selection of books poses a signal-to-noise problem that Eco was clearly worried about, even in the earliest of the footage used here; it only became worse after his death in 2016. Even more footage shows Eco quoting Borges — another lover of libraries — as he compares Borges' use of the labyrinth metaphor with our new problems of tome-seeking. And, when this writer tries to learn about, say, film noir, it's much easier to balk at the sheer number of intro books, classic texts, new (corrected) editions, specialized monographs, Goodreads reviews, book rankings, and meta-conversations than it is to simply pick up whatever's nearest and actually read it. That one reads and learns anything in our cornucopia of loud, loud information is a bonafide miracle.

Eco also meditates on a Shakespeare-Bacon conspiracy theory, the nature of conspiracy theories themselves, and, perhaps most importantly, the nature of fiction and just how *real* it is. A short aside about Alexandre Dumas realizing that his fictional characters were mentioned by prison tour guides more often than the real-life figures he based them on shows Eco's conviction of this case. In this way, despite its formal shortcomings, *A Library of the World* succeeds in its more humble

mission of displaying Eco's treasured thoughts and arguments. In following his thread about our signal-to-noise problem, Eco quotes from 1 Kings — verses and Vulgate readings about God's silence in earthquakes and fires — and subsequently praises such holy silence (just as the Greek mystery cults did when they sought holy knowledge). Thankfully, Eco was anything but. —

ZACH LEWIS

DIRECTOR: Davide Ferrario; **CAST:** —; **DISTRIBUTOR:** The Cinema Guild; **IN THEATERS:** June 30; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 20 min.

NIMONA

Nick Bruno & Troy Quane

Nimona, the animated film adaption of ND Stevenson's graphic novel of the same name — itself an expanded print edition of the cartoonist's popular Tumblr-based webcomic/senior thesis that ran from 2012 to 2014 — boasts the kind of plagued production that usually results in a project's cancellation. Which is exactly what happened in February 2021, after Disney shuttered Blue Sky Studios. But a year later, Megan Ellison's Annapurna Pictures announced it had resurrected the film (which had five fully-animated sequences already completed at the time of its cancellation), moved production to DNEG (far more prolific in the sphere of VFX), and partnered with Netflix for the film's release. None of which sounds all that promising in a present-day industry where competing streaming services gobble up otherwise shelved projects in their never-ending hunger for content, but it's surprisingly hard to argue that the vibrant version of *Nimona* that just hit Netflix isn't preferable to what Blue Sky — which basically stayed afloat on the bones of the *Ice Age* franchise while farting out also-rans like *Rio*, *Epic*, and *Ferdinand* in between installments — would have delivered.

Also surprising is how competent Netflix's animation division has been when taking stock of its limited release catalog, with impressive projects courtesy of Richard Linklater, Guillermo del Toro, Henry Selick, and Cartoon Saloon landing in 2022 alone. It's easy to see a film stickered with the streaming giant's name and take an immediately cynical stance, but perhaps given that track record in the world of animation, it shouldn't be surprising that *Nimona* is as visually appealing and technically accomplished as it is. Occupying a strange liminal space that merges current-day

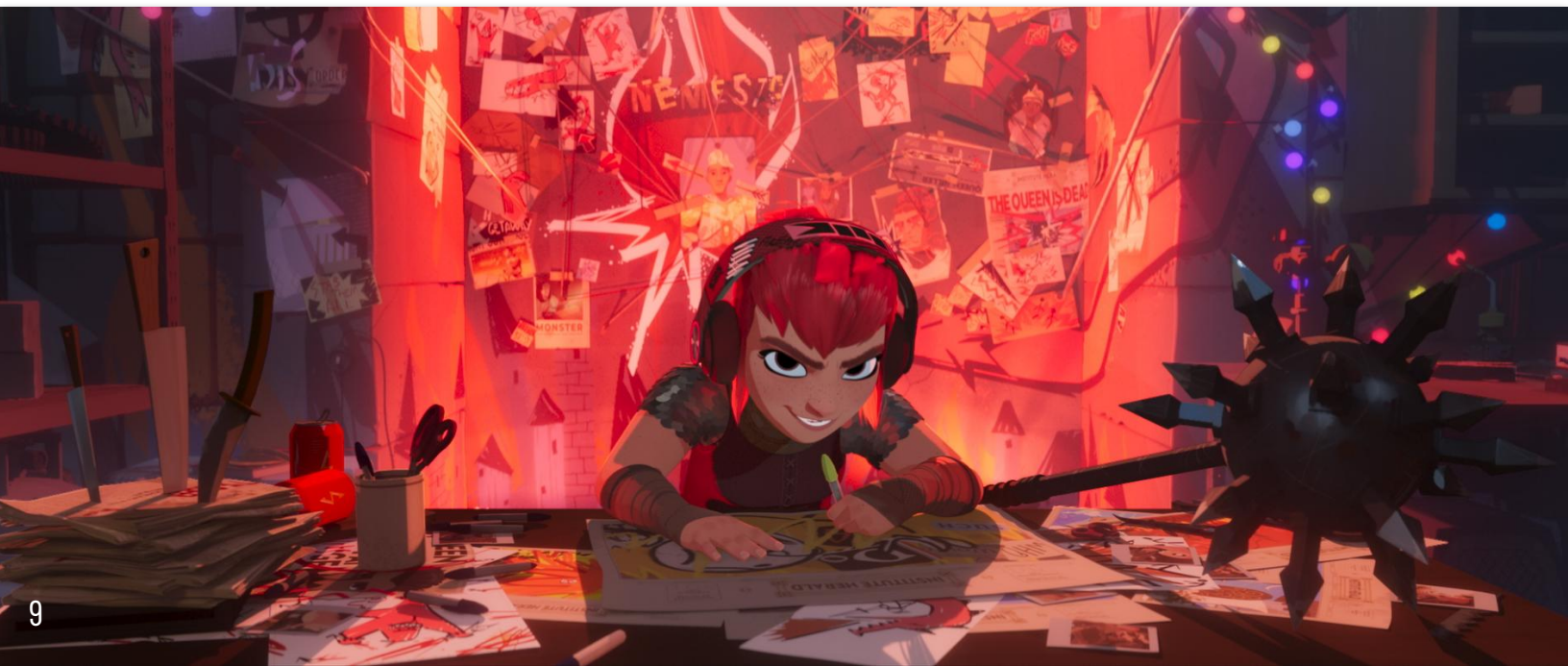
FILM *REVIEWS*

signifiers (subways, digital displays), high-tech sci-fi trappings (futuristic weaponry), and fantasy classicism built upon medieval settings and design, the film follows a disgraced knight, Ballister Boldheart (whose surname was changed from the graphic novel's Blackheart for... presumably a reason?), who is on the run after killing the queen. Except he was framed. Ambrosius Goldenloin, champion knight of the "Institute" sent to bring Ballister to justice, doesn't know this. And neither does Nimona, a mysterious shapeshifter with their own ax to grind, who tracks Ballister down and forwards herself as the perfect sidekick in his war against the Institute. Things are quickly cleared up, but the two still don't understand each other; Nimona doesn't understand Ballister's fealty to an establishment that would betray him, and he doesn't understand... Nimona.

It's here that we enter into a stretch of the film that offers up both the best and worst of what *Nimona* has to offer. On the one hand, there's an appealing anarchy that the character of Nimona brings, all barely harnessed chaos, precociousness dialed up to eleven and punctuated with a dose of giddily irreverent humor. For a while, we're firmly circling antihero territory, with Ballister's codes of honor getting suplexed by Nimona's struggles with impulse control and seeming moral ambivalence. But then things take an inelegant right turn into the territory of representation and inclusivity, and stay there for a while. Unlike Stevenson's — who is trans — source material, which was able to develop this subject matter with care and nuance, the film — which runs only 101 minutes to begin with, a full 18 of which are dedicated to the end credits — doesn't leave the space to do anything of the sort,

choosing instead to pummel viewers with its central metaphor, temporarily stagnating the film's momentum and executing its conceit with all the softness of a sledgehammer. "I'm just trying to understand what I'm working with here," Ballister states at one point, in response to Nimona's assertions of "I'm not a girl!" After another Nimona transformation, Ballister observes, "Now you're a boy?" to which Nimona replies, "Today I am." There's certainly value in exploring the clumsiness of the well-intentioned, but the problem with this dump of discourse is that in this age of social media-encouraged solipsism, genuine feeling and empathy for others has been displaced by buzzword-driven rhetoric and an algorithm-approved application. The murky relationship between Ballister and Ambrosius is handled more elegantly here, but it's a small grace in a film that reflects a brain-dulled, kneejerk inclination toward the unthinking absolutism of cancel culture. Built into *Nimona's* handling of its discourse is the suggestion that audiences can't muster the attention span or compassion to engage with such ideas without their being blatant and shallow — and sadly, that's collectively more true than we'd like to admit in this age of self-righteous sanctimony.

Admittedly, that saturation of poor execution reflects only a small (though still fairly governing) portion of *Nimona*, and there are greater pleasures to be found in the mash-up of 2D and 3D renderings, playful approach to traditional genre signifiers, and incorporation of geometric textures into its candy-colored world. But *Nimona* ultimately suffers most from arriving at an unfortunate moment in film animation. Earlier in June, *Across the Spider-Verse* re-imagined the very notion of what animated films,





specifically those based on existing visual art, could be, obliterating the lines between mediums and forms, realizing a kind of living comic book on screen. And last week, *Lonely Castle in the Mirror*, likewise based on a massively popular work of fantasy located at the intersection of adult and young adult literature, more gracefully demonstrated what art seeking to reflect and engender a culture of compassion looks like. It's never fair to judge a film for what it's not, and *Nimona* has plenty of visual pizzazz and personality to capture youngsters' attention — which is also where its discursive concerns will resonate most — but it's hard not to feel frustrated by a film of such clear conviction that falls into the same trap of shallow signposting that has infected mass culture. — **LUKE GORHAM**

DIRECTOR: Nick Bruno & Troy Quane; **CAST:** Chloë Grace Moretz, Riz Ahmed, Eugene Lee Yang; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Netflix; **STREAMING:** June 30; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 41 min.

RUN RABBIT RUN

Daina Reid

Director Daina Reid's Australian thriller *Run Rabbit Run* is yet another tired slab of trauma horror seemingly aimed at audiences unfamiliar with such exotic concepts as allegory and metaphor. Anyone with even a grade school-level understanding of the core elements of storytelling will see where this thing is headed by minute ten; everyone else will be asleep long before the end credits roll, as the unraveling of the film's *mystery* is not just overt, but dull in execution. *Succession* star Sarah Snook —

who certainly deserves a whole lot better than this nonsense — stars as Sarah, a successful obstetrician and mom to an adorable little girl named Mia (Lily LaTorre), who's celebrating her seventh birthday as the film opens. Sarah is amicably divorced from her husband, Pete (Damon Herriman), and still recovering from the recent death of her beloved father, but seems to be doing pretty alright considering the circumstances. Wouldn't you know it, though, Mia starts acting quite peculiar after the birthday celebration, constantly inquiring about a grandmother (Greta Scaachi) she's never met and demanding to be called by the new name of Alice. Why Alice, you might ask? It turns out that Sarah had a little sister who went missing at the age of — you guessed it — seven, and her name was — double duh — Alice. Mia also happens to be the spitting image of her.

As these things go, the majority of *Run Rabbit Run* consists of Mia acting both creepy as fuck and annoying as hell, while Sarah stands around looking understandably concerned, teardrops primed to fall from her big blue eyes at any given moment. To Reid's credit, she is able to create a very specific atmosphere of dread and unease, distinguishing the film a bit from other such offerings. But the end result is so one-note that it becomes altogether suffocating, snuffing out any potential scares in the process and creating torpor above all else. The photography is at least excellent, consisting of a lot of aerial shots highlighting the natural beauty and vastness of the Australian Outback, but in fairness you would have to leave the lens cap on to screw up such gorgeous vistas, and the beautiful compositions aren't deployed with any particular design or legible intent.

FILM *REVIEWS*

What's ultimately inescapable here is how every cliché regarding trauma horror is on full, unabashed display, from how our central protagonist is forced to confront secrets long ago buried to how ignoring one's past will ultimately lead to its repeating. There's an odd cynicism to nearly all of the films situated within this specific subgenre, one that says more about the current mindset of today's culture than anything else, wherein people are forced to pay for their earlier actions and recovery seems ultimately impossible. When the end result is both so inevitable and unrewarding, why even endure the grueling journey in the first place? Audiences would be wise to heed this advice, especially when it comes to films like *Run Rabbit Run*, where childhood drawings sketched in black crayon and depicting horrific acts are interspersed with ominous shots of pet bunnies, because lazy shorthand is apparently the name of the game. More provocative here is the question of when rabbits became scary? Is this an emerging horror trope, perhaps returning to the *Donnie Darko* well two decades later? It's easy to become distracted by such questions while slogging through the recycled thematic terrain that *Run, Rabbit, Run* has on offer, which is perhaps a more damning indictment in the horror genre than any other. Run, run indeed. — **STEVEN WARNER**

DIRECTOR: Daina Reid; **CAST:** Sarah Snook, Lily LaTorre, Greta Scacchi; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Netflix; **STREAMING:** June 28; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 40 min.

MILLIE LIES LOW

Michelle Savill

The burgeoning demand for cinematic “relevance” today comes with several implicit assumptions as to what that relevance entails. For starters, there's a certain complementary relationship between an appraisal of relevance and a given subjectivity: what is most true to life, and therefore pertinent to audiences, is less a matter of material reality than an individual's perception. Next is the moral judgment (or lack thereof) that each individual imposes upon their subjective realities, and whether or not it is sympathetic to, or critical of, whatever content to which they're exposed. In the context of film narratives, typically — though not always — relevance breeds a level of sympathy from the viewer towards whomever's perspective we're experiencing the world through. Finally, the meta-ethical question of whether sympathy erodes free will surfaces when squaring art with politics. When we stand by a point of view, sometimes unquestioningly, do we divest from their holder the agency to be anyone but whom we expect them to be?

These assumptions will no doubt undergird one's experience watching *Millie Lies Low* is a compelling if also enervating feature debut about compulsion and its consequences. Director Michelle Savill situates the viewer within the headspace of young Millie



(Ana Scotney), an aspiring architecture student from New Zealand, as the film begins *in medias res*, observing the singular action that triggers a cascade of events to follow. Millie has just been offered an internship at a prestigious New York firm, and her name is everywhere on the billboards and news of Wellington; while onboard her flight to prospective fame, however, she inexplicably panics and demands to be let off. This decision, we quickly learn, was a rash one — Millie haggles and pleads with airport staff for some kind of refund, to no avail — though not quite as fraught as the rabbit hole that's still to come. With her luggage in tow and barely any spare change, but beholden to appearances nonetheless, Millie devotes her time to faking her arrival in, and acclimatization to, the Big Apple, all endorsed and enjoined by the ferocious strictures of social media.

What follows, over the course of *Millie Lies Low's* 100 minutes, is a frenetic display of paranoia from all sides as our titular girl literally lies low in her hometown, posting regular Instagram updates and desperately trying to finance a replacement ticket, all while wrestling with the unresolved emotions from her recent break-up with ex-boyfriend Henry (Chris Alosio), among other things. And there's a *lot* to process, emotionally speaking. Millie and Henry have broken up not so much out of ill will, but because of their reservations about long-distance relationships. There's

also the fact that Millie's best friend, Carolyn (Jillian Nguyen), was gunning for the same internship, until Millie plagiarized her thesis work with just enough doubt to be let off the hook. Her relationship with her mom (Rachel House) has been a hotbed of resentment and estrangement, too. Effectively homeless (though largely a matter of choice) by the time she commences her grifting, Millie braves rain, shine, and the crippling pressure to cover up her lies with even greater ones, setting up accommodation in various abodes — a tent, a car, her teacher's house — until (if ever!) she finds a way out of her anxious travails.

On the whole, Savill's character study succeeds in evoking the dreadful loneliness of deceit without resorting to cheap *schadenfreude*, in large part because Millie's actions are strikingly emblematic of our ever-present and clinically online interactions today. Her refusal to call a panic attack a panic attack squares with our perception of her as an immature adolescent, and her relentless pursuit of a narrative she tries but fails to control recalls both the psychological tedium of Josephine Decker's *Madeline's Madeline* and the kinetic onslaught of the Safdies' *Uncut Gems*. Ultimately, Savill leaves the question of agency mostly unanswered, deigning to indict Millie for her blatant lack of personal responsibility whilst engendering sympathy for a devilishly unforgiving scenario that only

KILLING

Shinya Tsukamoto

"*Killing*, at first glance, can seem something of a left-field move for cult director Shinya Tsukamoto; it's a slow-paced period piece that expends nearly an hour of its runtime before anything actually gets murdered on-screen, dabbling in long sections of intentional narrative meanderings, to add a stated presence of monotony to each event. Every moment that anticipates some starting action... has an equally mundane resolution... It's this jarring contrast that binds the narrative core of *Killing*, reflecting the film's stringent dichotomy between Mokunshin's suppression and Sawamura's disinhibition. Even when there is on-screen violence, Tsukamoto rarely approaches these moments with the intentionality of glorifying the talents of either man; these scenes are frantically edited, rapidly cutting between extreme close-ups and stationary medium shots in an effect that's often nauseating... This isn't to suggest that *Killing* is as brazenly shocking (or even half as entertaining) as Tsukamoto's debut feature. But as the film progresses, one can recognize that this gonzo auteur really hasn't strayed that far from his original tactics." — PAUL ATTARD

DIRECTOR: Shinya Tsukamoto; **CAST:** Sosuke Ikematsu, Yu Aoi, Tatsuya Nakamura; **DISTRIBUTOR:** MUBI; **STREAMING:** June 27; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 20 min.



periodically worsens over time. This is perhaps a little underwhelming considering the palpating realization of what's at stake for Millie, although the film does shine where it matters most, namely, to probe her psychological interiority with credibility — and not didactically. Turns out, when you're down to do anything for the 'gram, it's hard to lay low and resist its highs.

— MORRIS YANG

DIRECTOR: Michelle Savill; **CAST:** Ana Scotney, Jillian Nguyen, Chris Alosio; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Film Movement; **IN THEATERS:** June 30; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 40 min.

RUBY GILLMAN: TEENAGE KRAKEN

Kirk DeMicco

As far as film titles go, *Ruby Gillman: Teenage Kraken* has to be one of the worst to swing out of Hollywood in many a moon. For starters, the filmmakers — or, as is inevitably the case, the studio — assume that large swaths of the moviegoing public know what a kraken even is. Okay, they probably do, but for the leviathan-ignorant, it's a mythical sea monster with giant tentacles that it uses to wreak havoc on sailors and landlubbers alike. That this particular kraken is a teenager doesn't add much more than a call for eye rolls. Then there is the matter of that

name: objectively, Ruby Gillman sounds much more like a Palm Springs mayoral candidate than it does the moniker of a big-budget animated kids flick's endearing protagonist. You buy insurance from a Ruby Gillman; you don't race to your local movie theater when you see her name on the marquee. In fact, the film's original title, *Meet the Gillmans*, is far more indicative of the highly derivative animated film affair that will meet audiences brave enough to plunk down their hard-earned cash for this bit of big squid energy — although that implies anyone has even heard of the movie, with Dreamworks Animation seemingly going out of its way to bury it in a big, shiny July 4th summer weekend coffin, its marketing campaign virtually nil and its appearance in theaters at all reeking of contractual obligation.

The titular Ruby (Lana Condor) is indeed a teenage kraken, but as voiceover narration helpfully explains to us in the film's opening moments, kraken are not vicious monsters, but instead humble and proud protectors of the sea. But Ruby doesn't even know she's a kraken. Living in a relatively small but bustling seaside town, Ruby has been raised to hide her true self, even though she is unclear as to who that self is. All she knows is that she is a sea creature of some sort, and her parents brought her to the surface fifteen years ago to live life as "humans" because they were being hunted by evil krakens. Ruby is blue, has fins where

her ears should be, and no nose. Everyone at school looks entirely human, so the fact that Ruby and her family have been able to keep up this ruse by simply telling everyone they are from Canada speaks to the level of intelligence and humor the film is trading in, courtesy of director Kirk DeMico and numerous other grown-ass adults.

In all other regards, Ruby is your average teenage girl, desperately trying not to make a fool of herself on a daily basis, hanging with her besties, posting Instagram stories, and looking forward to the upcoming junior prom, which her mother won't let her attend because it takes place on a boat, even though she is desperate to spend time with skater boi Connor (Jaboukie Young-White). Indeed, mom (Toni Collette) has never let Ruby swim in the ocean for vague reasons, although Ruby soon discovers the truth when a freak prom proposal accident involving Connor and a high-powered confetti gun – for the love of God, what are we doing? – sends her diving into the water to save a potential drowning, with Ruby ultimately growing to the size of several skyscrapers stacked on top of one another and destroying the school library and almost killing a woman in the process, which is oddly played for laughs. Mom ultimately comes clean: they are all krakens, and they left the ocean because Ruby's grandmother (Jane Fonda) was controlling and favored going to battle in lieu of more peaceful means of settling underwater disagreements. Ruby sneaks off to meet her grandmother, and secretly trains with her to harness her special powers, because she wants to end the long-standing feud between mermaids and kraken, and from here there are roughly 47 more characters and plot lines introduced into this sub-90-minute film.

Thematically, *Ruby Gillman* is just as overstuffed, with the filmmakers tackling everything from familial strife to bullying to xenophobia to teenage angst, and none in a way that might be viewed as thoughtful or insightful – the film just trots out a litany of dime-store platitudes about how growing up is tough, but isn't family, too? It all feels like someone hit pulse on a mixture of *Turning Red*, *Luca*, and *The Little Mermaid*, seemingly under the impression that the good will earned by the likes of Disney and Pixar will automatically endear audiences to the sludge being served up here. At least those films had something (to varying degrees) akin to emotional authenticity; *Ruby Gillman*,

meanwhile, is so busy and over-caffeinated that it can't even manage to find the heart within its story, no matter how many times it clumsily tries. Even the animation is exhausting, a predictable combination of photorealistic backgrounds and rubbery-looking characters, its emphasis on day-glo purples, pinks, and blues numbing viewers into glassy-eyed indifference after only a few short minutes. The voice work is perfectly adequate, although Sam Richardson as a lovably goofy uncle gets MVP simply because he seems borderline invested in the proceedings – surprisingly high bar to clear here. More dire is how hard it is to tell who this was even made for, as its emphasis on high school and prom seems to suggest teenage girls as the intended audience, but the storytelling and characterization are so simplistic – and the filmmaking so manic – that young children seem a more suitable choice, though even they are bound to be bored by the absolute recycled nothingness at the film's core. It seems that teenage krakens just don't have a target demo. — **STEVEN WARNER**

DIRECTOR: Kirk DeMico; **CAST:** Lana Condor, Toni Collette, Annie Murphy; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Universal Pictures; **IN THEATERS:** June 30; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 30 min.

LONELY CASTLE IN THE MIRROR

Keiichi Hara

Anime has always been more inclined toward YA-facing and -reflecting projects than most other film genres, perhaps only rivaled by the short-lived post-*Harry Potter* cottage industry of emotionally manipulative, usually dystopian, mud that sprang up in parallel to young adult literature's emergence as a money-making force for the publishing industry. It only seemed a matter of time, then, before Japanese author Mizuki Tsujimura's massively popular young adult novel *Lonely Castle in the Mirror*, already adapted to a manga series, would make the jump to film. Directed by Keiichi Hara, *Lonely Castle* centers on Kokoro, a shy teenage girl struggling with loneliness and avoiding school after a bullying incident, who is swept away into a fantasy world after finding her bedroom mirror glowing. Arriving at the eponymous castle, where she is greeted by the wolf queen – who looks like a young girl in a red dress and a wolf mask – Kokoro meets six other middle schoolers, all of whom are also avoiding attending school. Kokoro is the last of the group to

FILM *REVIEWS*

arrive, and the Wolf Queen reiterates the “rules”: the castle will be open to all of them for the next year, during which they can choose to seek (or not) a secret key that will grant the finder one wish. The catch? If somebody makes a wish, they will all immediately be banished from the castle and nobody will remember each other or their time spent there. The only other rule: they must all leave by 5:00 PM every day; if anyone lingers, they will be eaten by a giant wolf who stalks the halls in the evening.

A fabulist narrative of sorts, *Lonely Castle* is playful with these origins: the Wolf Queen refers to the seven children as her “Red Riding Hoods,” while the less-known Grimm’s fairy tale “The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats” serves as an essential decoder in the mystery of the key. But this is mostly textural in the film version, and the story is actually deeply rooted in society’s current moment. In the way of anime’s best works, *Lonely Castle*’s themes are heavier, more complex, and more reflective of recognizable humanity than is typically represented in the sanitized efforts of Western animation. Kokoro and her cohorts are victims of the growing, Internet-abetted isolation of our global present, and it’s to the film’s immense credit how seriously and delicately Hara handles the endemic mental health struggles of young kids in the 21st century. *Lonely Castle* is a notably gentle film, both in its feel and approach to difficult subject matter, one that somehow finds space to build depth into its many characters despite the relative lack of time devoted to each. Children here struggle with traumas big and small, from crushing

parental expectations to abuse to feelings of insignificance, and *Lonely Castle*’s deeply affecting climax hinges on (thinly-veiled) suicidal ideation, our potential for allyship, and our ability to reach across the divides of personal pain and meet others with empathy and care. It even occasionally tiptoes into Dickian territory, utilizing its fantastical premise to question the relationship between mental hygiene and our ability to trust our own perceptions of reality.

Disappointingly, the film is far less successful as a visual text. Hara’s usual vibrance isn’t felt in the film’s colors and modest compositions, and much of the proceedings subsequently feel perfunctory and drab. Given the ennui these characters exist within on a daily basis, it feels like a missed opportunity that the castle’s world isn’t more richly explored in its visual design, with the shimmering blue-violet abstraction of the mirrors one of the only flourishes to be found; indeed, things feel *so* muted that it all seems like the intentional setup for a dull/dazzling contrast that never comes. Even the setting’s spatial potential is left undeveloped, with the castle’s interiors mostly rendered as humbly furnished sitting rooms rather than an exotic fantasy world, and characters’ interactions with the space relegated primarily to lounging and chatting in close-up. There’s also the issue of the novel’s final third – wherein character pasts and motivations are unraveled, which is essential to the work’s focus on finding safety in others – being condensed to a montage. But that sequence, short shrift though it’s given, proves emotionally potent in execution, which is reflective of the film’s general



character. In an age where it feels like ChatGPT could immediately step in and produce the same complexity of story arcs and depth of character psychology, it's no good to turn our noses up at imperfect films that capture the imperfection of humanity in a way that doesn't feel AI-generated. It's the great, and thus greatly observed, paradox of our world that loneliness grows alongside access to connection. *Lonely Castle* quite beautifully suggests that the first step to combating this loneliness perhaps comes in looking not to the Internet, but to the mirror. — **LUKE GORHAM**

DIRECTOR: Keiichi Hara; **CAST:** Ami Toma, Takumi Kitamura, Sakura Kiryu; **DISTRIBUTOR:** GKIDS; **IN THEATERS:** June 21; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 56 min.

PRISONER'S DAUGHTER

Catherine Hardwicke

It might seem trite to begin a film review with a quote, but we live in a world of clichés and can only outrun our own for so long. At the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy famously writes, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." With her latest directorial venture, *Prisoner's Daughter*, Catherine Hardwicke provides a pointed counter to this assertion with a domestic drama so rife with platitudes that the film begins to feel like a parody of itself.

The director's second release of 2023 — following April's *Mafia Mamma* — Hardwicke continues to fall victim to the same pitfalls of all her recent work, forgoing the honest spontaneity and painful meditation of earlier films like *Thirteen*. Max (Brian Cox), a terminally-ill con, has been given compassionate release to live the remainder of his life under house arrest with his estranged daughter, Maxine (Kate Beckinsale), and her precocious 12-year-old son Ezra (Christopher Convery). Ezra's father, Tyler (Tyson Ritter), is a deadbeat, "undiscovered" musician with a drug problem, whose mound of shared debt has made it difficult for Maxine to put food on the table, much less pay for Ezra's expensive epilepsy medication. Max is much less welcomed home than he is permitted to live out his days here on the condition that he pay his way and cover rent for the family. From this initial setup, the rest of the film unfolds with a languid inertia that moves at the surface of what could have been a deep

emotional pool of familial reckoning. Tyler wreaks havoc, Max softens, Ezra and Maxine warm to him; there's a rift, there's a reconciliation, there's a violent climax. It all amounts to nothing.

Hardwicke has Frankensteined the skeleton of a story without a mind for muscle. Despite its material, *Prisoner's Daughter* lacks heart, and is instead pushed along its uneven course by an array of overtly manipulative plot beats that make certain sequences feel like a trauma-dumped Lifetime movie. In one particularly jarring scene, an angry Max knocks out Tyler, which then causes Ezra to have a seizure. As Maxine panics over his body, Hardwicke at first meanders over the the head of the seizing boy, and then lingers; here we are brought, face-to-face, not with a scene of intense familial strife, but with cheaply packaged pain that feels borderline inappropriate in its blitheness, like a livestreamer making content from a riot.

Through it all, there's still something to be said for how well Cox and Beckinsale work with what they're given, so much so that in scenes of uninterrupted dialogue, the film occasionally captures a gentle, charming rhythm. But even these scenes are troubled, too often chopped up in favor of jarring cuts and questionable handheld zigzagging, reminiscent of the stalking shots employed in Hardwicke's *Twilight*. This regrettable approach to composition is obviously not the fault of other actors, who all put in admirable work keeping up with Cox and Beckinsale. But both their efforts and the film's flow do no favors for a director who chooses to let her camera consistently linger far beyond the point where a scene has gone stale.

This is the essential problem of *Prisoner's Daughter*, a film that picks broadly familiar ideas for its material but doesn't do the work to enrich or reshape them. This isn't to say the film is entirely unwatchable, but Hardwicke here fails to leverage her distinct style or proven facility with thorny material in a way that would transcend the dramatic clichés that suffocate the film. When we are met with such banality in our art, from where should we find inspiration to transcend the staleness of our own clichés in life? — **CONOR TRUAX**

DIRECTOR: Catherine Hardwicke; **CAST:** Kate Beckinsale, Brian Cox, Tyson Ritter, Ernie Hudson; **DISTRIBUTOR:** Vertical; **IN THEATERS:** June 30; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 38 min.



Photo Credits:

Cover - Wiseau Films; **Page 1, 2, 3** - Robert Zuckerman/Touchstone Pictures/Jerry Bruckheimer Inc; **Page 4, 5, 6** - Wiseau-Films/TPW Films; **Page 7** - Cinema Guild; **Page 9** - Netflix; **Page 10** - Sarah Enticknap/Netflix; **Page 11** - Film Movement; **Page 13** - Universal Pictures; **Page 15** - GKIDS;
Back Cover - Universal Pictures

In
Review
Online

film
&
music
criticism