The V word is mentioned once and early in MIDNIGHT SON, signaling that the movie isn’t trying to be a self-consciously subversive take on the much-traveled subgenre. Rather, this independent production (currently playing Montreal’s Fantasia festival) is a straightforward and well-told story of one young man’s attempts to deal with his unfortunate hunger for blood.

Jacob (Zak Kilberg) dwells in a basement apartment in Los Angeles where he keeps the windows covered by day, and works a job as a security guard after dark. He has always known that his skin is especially sensitive to sunlight, and has shunned human contact. One night, he hits it off with an offbeat young woman named Mary (LEECHES!’ Maya Parish, also one of the executive producers), and their first clinch is interrupted by a bit of blood-shedding—though not the kind you might expect. Despite this false start, Jacob and Mary continue to try to forge a relationship, even as Jacob begins to develop unsettling cravings for blood. He does his best to procure that nourishment from harmless sources, and keep his secret from Mary—though that’s hard to do when his eyes go all funny in the heat of the moment.

MIDNIGHT SON is as much a dark romantic drama as a horror film, and writer/director Scott Leberecht (a visual FX artist on movies like SPAWN and SLEEPY HOLLOW making a confident feature filmmaking debut) has a good handle on both sides. Rather than a showcase for his digital talents, he has crafted a down-and-gritty trip through the LA nightscape, populated by people struggling in various ways to get by and dealing with assorted addictions. (Mary has an unfortunate habit of her own, though Leberecht doesn’t push the comparison between her and Jacob’s joneses too hard.) Leberecht and cinematographer Lyn Moncrief’s often handheld camera keeps us up close and personal with these troubled souls, and while the emphasis is on emotional trauma over physical damage, the writer/director isn’t shy about letting the red stuff flow when the scene calls for it.

Comparisons to past movies like George A. Romero’s MARTIN, Larry Fessenden’s HABIT and Abel Ferrara’s THE ADDICTION may seem obvious, yet Leberecht makes them moot via the way he makes his characters specific, in concert with his talented cast. Kilberg holds attention and sympathy throughout even as Jacob loses control of his own actions, and is strongly complemented by Parish as Mary grapples with her new boyfriend’s increasingly scary behavior. Jo D. Jonz adds effective touches of humor and menace as a hospital worker who helps Jacob quench his thirst (the new FRIDAY THE 13TH’s Arlen Escarpeta turns up as Marcus’ brother), and there are nice, understated supporting turns by veteran actors Tracey Walter and Larry Cedar as Carl, Jacob’s janitor co-worker, and a skeptical police detective respectively.

Certain rules of vampirism are followed here, while others are not, with the latter resulting in MIDNIGHT SON’s occasional touches of humor (including amusing use of a clip from the original FRIGHT NIGHT on TV). In the end, what Leberecht has come up with is not a “vampire movie” so much as a movie about a vampire, one who doesn’t sport fangs or (aside from those eyes) any other supernatural attributes, but is rather a lonely guy trying to deal with a condition that puts him at odds with society. In its modest but compelling way, MIDNIGHT SON harks back to the tradition of Universal’s classic creature features that made their monsters human, even as it incorporates a very modern milieu and concerns.