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With Adam Green's HATCHET II hitting DVD and Blu-ray today (see review here), it’s high time we got around to belatedly covering Anchor Bay’s disc releases of FROZEN, his second fright feature as writer/director. Of his movies, this literal chiller is the best showcase of Green’s filmmaking chops, and the bonus features demonstrate his fortitude in tackling a project requiring far more than the usual physical commitment.

A stranded-in-the-wild survival thriller in the vein of OPEN WATER, but shot far more formally, FROZEN introduces us to best buddies Dan (Kevin Zegers) and Lynch (Shawn Ashmore) and Dan’s girlfriend Parker (Emma Bell) on a weekend skiing and snowboarding vacation. Lynch isn’t too thrilled with Parker, who’s making her first trip with the guys, getting in the way of his and Dan’s bromance, but the resulting tension is nothing compared to what arises when they make the ill-advised decision to take one more trip up the slope after Sunday night falls. A series of circumstances conspire to strand them on the shut-down chair lift in the dark, halfway up the mountain, with a 50-foot drop below them, a storm moving in and nobody knowing they’re up there.

Green smoothly navigates through all the plot devices that have to click into place to get his trio of protagonists into their predicament, and establishes a bunch of convincing obstacles to their getting out. The moment when the lights on the lift towers go out, one inexorably after another, is a great early shiver, and the tension ratchets up as our heroes and heroine realize the seriousness of their situation. The resort will be closed for the next five days, and none among them have their cell phone on them. Of course they can’t just jump to safety—the fall would badly injure or kill them. And to add to the danger, the mountain’s four-footed, howling residents have started to circle. How will they get out of this alive?

That question creates plenty of suspense of the what-would-I-do? variety, and Green largely keeps Dan, Lynch and Parker’s attempts to extricate themselves within the realm of plausibility—punctuated with the kind of small-scale gross-outs that can occur when human skin meets frozen metal. Their interactions ring true as well, all three actors creating believable,

generally likable young people who have forgivable flaws and understandable jealousies that become exacerbated as the hours (and hours…) creep by with decreasing hope of rescue. As inner truths start to come out under pressure, there are moments where the dialogue tends toward the overwritten or overexplanatory, but the urgency of the scenario is enough for the movie to surmount any problems with purple prose.

FROZEN is also a remarkable technical achievement, and one whose craft and style directly serve the story: We never for one moment doubt that the three kids really are suspended in midair, their lives literally hanging in the balance. Green and cinematographer Will Barratt keep things visually varied, alternating tight, revealing close-ups on the protagonists with wide, swooping camera moves that underscore their isolation. As frightening as the oppressive dark is that initially surrounds the three, it’s just as effective when the sun rises, and they’re surrounded by an austerely beautiful winterscape (looking great in the 2.40:1 disc transfers) that provides an ironic contrast to their potentially deadly plight.

The capturing of these images was almost as grueling an experience as what the characters go through, as captured in a terrific multipart documentary that’s the discs’ centerpiece. “Catching Frostbite” provides insight into how Green came up with the idea and got the production set up; “Three Below Zero” focuses on casting, and how the three leads (including Bell, who we learn was the very first to audition for Parker) developed their roles; and “Shooting Through It” explores the creation of the physical environment, via everything from special equipment to forced-perspective models of the chair lift. These are just appetizers, however, for “Beating the Mountain,” which takes us onto the titular location for a goosebumps-and-all chronicle of the FROZEN shoot.

Green is seen early on in this portion on the set of GRACE (which he produced), vowing, “No more night shoots, no more cold,” and boy, did he go back on his word for FROZEN. The commitment and stamina of everyone involved is on full display here—none more so than the actors, who are shown dangling on the real lift for hours at a time, to the point where not all of Bell’s hysteria was being faked for the cameras. As if that weren’t enough, we witness a close call or two involving the real wolves employed for a couple of key scenes. There are lighter moments too, though—Green instructing Bell on the correct pronunciation of “Sarlacc pit,” a segment devoted to Cody Snider (son of Dee), an on-set assistant/class clown who was dubbed “Schneiderman” by his crewmates, and a recollection of the day GOSSIP GIRL dailies showed up by mistake. As much as you sympathize with FROZEN’s principals while watching the movie, you’ll feel just as much for its creators as they soldier through the most challenging production imaginable—especially given that this was an independent project of modest financial means.

Indeed, Green recalls advising potential crew, “Here’s why you shouldn’t do it,” at the start of a commentary he shares with Barratt (whose experience shooting winter sports for TV came in especially handy on FROZEN) and editor Ed Marx. This track, exclusive to the Blu-ray, gets into the technical nitty-gritty right down to their reasons for using a particular film stock, and also addresses how the characters and their relationships were built up in the cutting room. Present on both discs is a commentary by Green, Zegers, Ashmore and Bell (the latter of whom shows up late), which is more anecdotal and devoted to performance concerns, as well as the travails the stars endured during the shoot (though at no point does it seem like they don’t believe it was worth it). Several subjects wind up being covered on both tracks, most notably a somewhat defensive Green addressing those who doubt that FROZEN’s events could happen in real life.

Rounding out the discs are deleted scenes, one including a nice dramatic moment for Bell and another subjecting one unfortunate to an even grislier fate, all accompanied by optional and revealing Green commentary. There are trailers for FROZEN, HATCHET and other Anchor Bay releases and, finally, an easy-to-find Easter egg called “Chair 92” that recounts a tragic occurrence at one of the shooting spots—a creepy story, but one already pretty much covered on the technical commentary.

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