

“THE WARD” (TIFF Film Review)

Written by Adam Nayman

Thursday, 16 September 2010 00:22



The best evidence that THE WARD (which premiered this week at the Toronto International Film Festival) was directed by John Carpenter is that his name is above the title. It's certainly not on the screen; working from a maladroit script by Sean and Michael Rasmussen, Carpenter—who hasn't made a feature since 2001's deliriously silly genre mashup GHOSTS OF MARS—directs like a journeyman rather than an auteur.

It just doesn't seem like his heart is in this haunted-asylum story, which stars Amber Heard as a disturbed young woman admitted into a psychiatric hospital after burning down a stranger's home for no apparent reason. No prizes for guessing that the motives for this supremely photogenic act of arson will be unraveled over the film's duration.



The clichés just keep on coming: Heard's new digs are staffed by nasty nurses (of both genders) and presided over by an obviously sleazy head psychiatrist (Jared Harris); the other inmates comprise a cross-section of troubled-girl types (Meryl Streep's daughter Mamie Gummer is the most ostentatiously bugged-out); and, as in virtually every horror movie produced since 2000, there's a long-haired, wraith-like female apparition that spends her time popping into frame like Andy Samberg in an SNL Digital Short (except that her appearances aren't funny on purpose).

I'm not trying to be nasty to Carpenter, whose relegation to the Hollywood margins around the mid-'80s was undeserved, and who has the talent to pull off memorable horror on a relative shoestring (see 1994's Lovecraftian pastiche IN THE MOUTH OF MADNESS, with its great

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Sam Neill performance and handful of sharp, honest scares). The problem with THE WARD is not so much its lack of style as the fact that the director doesn't seem to have much interest in the material: not in the plight of his female characters, whose ensemble interactions are strained even as their individual personalities are admirably vivid; not in the institutional environment, which feels borrowed from any number of snake-pit dramas; and certainly not in what ends up being the movie's theme/organizing gimmick, which I will not spoil here but which really could have used a hambone like Donald Pleasance to explicate with the right level of campy conviction. (The reveal, when it comes, is one of the worst-handled aspects of the film).

There are surely worse horror movies coming out these days than THE WARD—but considering the context of its creation, I can't think of one that's more disappointing.



{jcomments on}