Written by Logan DeSisto Thursday, 21 April 2011 12:51



With Jim Mickle's STAKELAND opening this Friday in a limited theatrical release, we thought it would be appropriate to look back at Logan DeSisto's review of the writer/director's first feature-length film, MULBERRY STREET.

Upon first hearing of MULBERRY STREET, I had my doubts. A horror movie about rat people invading New York City—what could be more absurd? At the theater, however, I was surprised to see that the line of people waiting to buy tickets was twice as long as it was for any other Tribeca entry that day. My amazement grew as I entered the theater, finding it almost completely full, always a good sign for any horror film. Obviously the word of mouth generated by the film's Friday premiere had been good, and with renewed hope I settled into my seat, pressing any lingering doubts to the back of my mind. After a jubilant introduction by writer/director Jim Mickle, the lights began to dim and my departure down MULBERRY STREET began.



Following an unnerving opening sequence of rats crawling around the bowels of good old NYC, MULBERRY plunges the viewer headfirst into the world of Clutch (played by co-scripter Nick Damici), a retired boxer and all-around good guy. Awaiting the arrival of his daughter from overseas, Clutch busies himself by mulling around the apartment house were he lives, allowing the audience to get to know the many characters who populate the film. There is Kay (Bo Corre), a single mom who has eyes for Clutch, and her son Otto (Javier Picayo); Coco (Ron Brice), his flamboyant best friend; and Frank (Larry Medich) and Charlie (Larry Fleischman), who are the oldest of the tenants, both in age and years lived there. Together they make an urban family, each leaning on the other for help and support while their building decays around them.

Unbeknownst to these six residents, the world around their small dwelling is changing. Vicious rat attacks are taking place throughout the city, spreading a virus that horrifically alters its victims, and nothing can stop the unfolding mayhem. Eyewitness to this is Casey (Kim Blair), Clutch's long-awaited daughter, who is desperately trying to navigate her way home. But when the city that never sleeps becomes locked down and the inhabitants of 51 Mulberry Street find themselves surrounded by the vicious, mutated humans, those still alive are forced to battle to remain that way.

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Shooting completely on location in lower Manhattan, Mickle and his crew make incredible use of not only the city, but the relatively small spaces they had to work with. All the indoor scenes were filmed in the same apartment, painted and dressed different ways; unable to get the required permits to shoot the movie, Mickle resorted to guerrilla filmmaking tactics to get the shots he wanted—many times hiding the camera between cars. He even lensed the crowd-chaos scenes during a Fourth of July parade, crouching between parked vehicles to get just the right shots of Blair wandering through the throngs. At one point, he captures a completely empty playground during the day—a feat one would likely be unable to pull off twice. It is shots like those that prove Mickle is truly a master of not only his surroundings, but his camera as well.



When dealing with an ultra-low-budget horror film, the most difficult element for most directors is the special FX. Mickle takes this reality in stride, using shadows and profiling to accentuate the gruesome creations of Adam Morrow and Eyespot Pictures. This makes the transformations much more believable; the deformed characters are largely cloaked in darkness, with just enough the light playing on their features to make them appear more ratlike. Thus, not only are the creatures made to seem more authentic, but the viewer can become fully engrossed in the film without being distracted by the FX.

The most impressive part of MULBERRY STREET, however, is neither the location shooting nor the FX; it is the cast. Even though there is not a "name" among them (for some, this is their first onscreen role, though you could never tell from their performances), each actor is stellar. Every performance is not only believable but authentic, and over the course of the film you begin to care about each character, no matter how minor—truly an accomplishment in a genre rife with subpar acting and unlikable protagonists.

An allegory for post-9/11 Manhattan, MULBERRY STREET is anything but your run-of-the-mill horror flick. Truly a New York story, it is a leap above almost every other low-budget zombie film and one of the highlights of the Tribeca fest, and should certainly not be missed. Although there's no question that it is a B-movie, the film is as close to an A as one can get.

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