

“BRAWLER” (Fantasia Film Review)

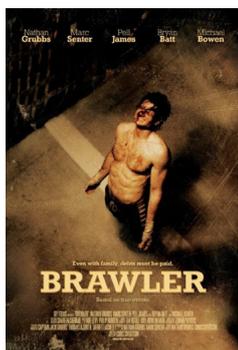
Written by Ariel Esteban Cayer
Thursday, 11 August 2011 10:24



“Freddy Fontaine’s son, brawling on a boat? That the thing local legends are made of...”

In a male-dominated industry and culture, it is easy for films—genre films especially—to be overbearingly and uncomfortably andocentric. While most films have rarely, if ever, had something new to say about male relationships, past the recognized macho-vs.-effeminate conflict that permeates today’s mainstream narratives, it was with great joy and surprise that I witnessed [Fantasia 2011](#) unveil a fascinating selection of films that knowingly or not, addressed issues of masculinity in genuinely refreshing, personal and sometimes brutally honest manners.

Thus it is in the midst of BLEAK NIGHT’s portrait of youth’s competitive cruelty, BELLFLOWER’s exploration of masculine tendencies for self-destruction, WAKE IN FRIGHT’s shattering of class perceptions and THE CORRIDOR’s portrait of shifting masculine friendship in the face of a crisis that BRAWLER, Chris Sivertson’s Southern tale of cage fights and brotherhood, finds its footing. And it proves to be as powerful in its themes, performances and execution as any of the exemplary films mentioned above.



Inspired by New Orleans’ boxing tradition, specifically a true story involving two brothers’ infamous confrontation, BRAWLER explores the love-hate relationship between siblings Charlie and Bobby Fontaine, their careers and declining relationship, as both find themselves stuck in the web of an underground New Orleans riverboat fighting league peripherally run by the mob. Mixing traditional boxing and gambling scenes’ sensibilities with modern-day UFC-style mixed martial arts action into one hot onslaught of kicks and punches, BRAWLER is a highly kinetic film, building upon Big Easy folklore, a striking Southern aesthetic and a hint of

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Martin Scorsese’s crime-fueled cinematic tour de forces.

Like Scorsese, Sivertson knows that good stories need good characters, and Charlie and Bobby Fontaine, portrayed respectively by Nathan Grubbs and Marc Senter (of Fantasia favorites RED WHITE & BLUE and Sivertson’s previous THE LOST) do more than carry the film; both actors give extremely strong performances, giving their all in superb physical choreography owing nothing to contemporary kung-fu or boxing films, but finding a brutal, dirty style of their own.

The film’s themes of family ring true and deep in the midst of this sun-scarred facet of Americana, and when Grubbs’ appropriately patriarchal Charlie, taking after his father and boxing legend Freddy Fontaine, seeks to settle down and look out for his indebted and recklessly egotistical brother Bobby (brought to energetic life by spitfire and real-life karate black belt Marc Senter), tensions escalate, money stacks up, the mob gets involved and both end up in the ring—facing off against each other.

Also populated by an amazing supporting cast, including MAD MEN’s Bryan Batt and genre favorite Michael Bowen, BRAWLER follows a somewhat predictable plot structure that is made nonetheless unwaveringly fascinating by its two main actors as well as other performers—those behind the camera. Indeed, BRAWLER shines through Zoran Popovic’s cinematography, who gives the film an exhaustingly hot flavor, reminiscent of BELLFLOWER’s sepia-toned lensing. Blocking the fight scenes with great energy, Sivertson turns every confrontation into an event, yet constantly drives the plot forward and gives space for more of the great character interactions at the heart of the film.

In exploring the divide between Charlie and Bobby—who, while growing apart, fail to recognize their need for each other—BRAWLER adresses issues of brotherhood and family (their whole relationship being framed by their father’s death and a VHS tape that once brought them together) in touching and thoughtful ways, while providing enough high-testosterone punches to make it required viewing for action and martial-arts film enthusiasts. Worthwhile for the way it handles its themes and characters rather than its familiar storyline, BRAWLER exists within the welcome grey zones of characterization and features amazing performances bt Senter and Grubbs, making this fighting drama a cut above the rest and one of the most memorable indies of this year’s Fantasia.



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