Most horror films deal with threats from without—monsters or ghosts or psychos that represent an external danger. COMPLIANCE, which some would label a drama but is as chilling as films get, creates that effect by finding the “monster” within characters who could be any one of us, at the wrong time and under the wrong circumstances.

Based on a startlingly large number of true cases, COMPLIANCE (beginning its theatrical release this Friday; see a list of playdates here) takes place over the course of one day and night at a ChickWich fast-food restaurant that’s set in Ohio but could be in Any Suburb, USA. Things aren’t going well for middle-aged supervisor Sandra (Ann Dowd); a careless mistake by an employee has brought unwanted attention from the home office, and they’re short supplies for what will likely be a busy Friday. The last thing she needs is a policeman calling her, informing her that one of her cashiers, Becky (Dreama Walker), has been accused of stealing money from a customer’s purse. Wanting to be helpful and settle the situation with as little fuss as possible, Sandra has Becky come to a back room, where “Officer Daniels,” still on the line, asks Sandra if she wouldn’t mind conducting a search of Becky’s person herself…

The crux of writer/director Craig Zobel’s story is that “Officer Daniels” isn’t an officer at all, but a prank caller who manipulates Sandra, and then others, into a campaign of emotional and physical humiliation against poor Becky. She protests her innocence, of course, but “Officer Daniels” sure sounds like a cop, coating his questions with layers of stern authority tempered

by professional sympathy. He almost comes off as regretful as he convinces Sandra et al. to degrade Becky, but after all, he’s got a job to do and case to pursue, and they all don’t want the police more directly involved, right?

COMPLIANCE is a scalpel-sharp examination of the lengths people will go when they think they’re heeding an authority figure, how they can forget themselves and abandon rationality in the interest of self-preservation and how the right kind of firm but soft-spoken interrogation can plant seeds of doubt into any psyche. “Officer Daniels” is able to convince everyone he speaks to that they’re doing the right thing—even Becky herself, from whom he’s able to wheedle personal information that he then turns against her. The tension becomes excruciating as we watch the situation in the back room become progressively worse, wondering how far the characters will go—and asking ourselves whether we would take things that far, while likely convincing ourselves that we’d be smarter than that and recognize the falsity of what’s going on.

The truth of the matter is that the participants in over 70 real-life incidents really did go along with the demands of the respective callers—though of course, a movie must develop its own plausibility even when it’s based on actual events. In that, Zobel is unnervingly successful, building a foundation of everyday workplace reality in the opening scenes that is incrementally violated once the phone starts ringing. The acts performed at the behest of “Officer Daniels” eventually become outrageous—or would seem so if Zobel didn’t so carefully pace the buildup to them, as more and more people become involved and their complicity becomes a small but concentrated kind of mass hysteria. Everyone becomes so convinced that what they’re doing is the right thing, no one makes one of several simple calls of their own that could blow the faux officer’s cover.

The crucial decision in dramatizing all this was whether or not to show the caller himself—and it isn’t too long into the film before we meet “Officer Daniels,” played by Pat Healy in a 180-degree turn from his lovable nerd in THE INNKEEPERS. His delivery and demeanor as he persuades his victims to look past any sense of decency is spot-on—but there’s one small, telling moment that really puts the character across. At a point around midway through the film, Healy lets a look of amused disbelief pass over the caller’s face, as if even he can’t believe what he’s getting away with—and it emboldens him to continue, to push harder, to test what further boundaries he can cross. And he has perfect, compliant subjects over at the ChickWich, where their obedience in turn feeds on itself.

As the object of his random, anonymous malice, Walker is instantly sympathetic and heartbreakingly vulnerable, and her confusion and disbelief over what’s happening to her

(including a few moments in which Becky is required to undress, which are handled as tastefully as possible under the circumstances) are more emotionally fraught than any scene of physical violence could be. The true audience surrogate, however, is Sandra, whom Dowd imbues with a fundamental decency yet a fatal susceptibility. COMPLIANCE wouldn’t work if the actress and Zobel weren’t able to get a viewer horrified both for and at her, and they achieve both to powerful effect.