

"CHEAP THRILLS" (SXSW Movie Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
Saturday, 09 March 2013 01:00



While there's nary a viral video to be found in *CHEAP THRILLS*, the film is imbued with the culture of now (maybe always) and the fact that despite pleas for peace, we as humans enjoy seeing each other embarrassed, devalued and crushed. It's inherent in reality television and 30 second fail videos, transcends friendships and class, and extends right to the 1% who have so much that the only true entertainment left is the indignities of others.

That sentiment is apparent in the first ten minutes of E.L. Katz's feature debut, as hard up writer Craig (Pat Healy) is fired from his job as a mechanic. He, as so many hard up do, heads for a drink. Of course, he heads to a place that long lost friend Vince (Ethan Embry) quickly refers to as somewhere "you're looking for trouble." It's a dive, the exact kind of midday hangout you can go, have a look around and think, "at least I'm not that guy." One of *those* guys is the rough around the edges Vince, who Craig hasn't seen in five years and is exactly where Craig shapes him up to be. *CHEAP THRILLS* has a lot on its mind, but before it turns its concerns to the bleak nature of some of our entertainment, it hones in something entirely melancholy and true: how we outgrow certain friends.

Midst that awkward game of catch-up and judging, Craig and Vince run into Colin (David Koechner) and Violet (Sara Paxton), a brash, flush, flashy pair who hemorrhage money and want party buds. The two are bettin' men (and lady) and it's not long before Colin is putting up cash for small bits of mayhem (race to a tequila shot here, get that chick at the bar to slap you in the face there). This being something of a horror film, it escalates. Boy, it escalates.

By the time, they've ended up back at their posh place, the games have become a two-man war between old friends, which is where the script from Trent Haaga and David Chirchirillo veers from boozy dark comedy (and remains so, just *very* dark) to rough reflection of a world where the colder wealthy watch on as shit situations force classmates to forsake each other and themselves.



"CHEAP THRILLS" (SXSW Movie Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
Saturday, 09 March 2013 01:00

It certainly moves in that order. The games come at the expense of others, then specifically each other, with little regard for personal principles along the way (being vague is preferred here because CHEAP THRILLS is absolutely an audience picture). There's a cynical attitude at play in the activities, but it certainly doesn't bring the energy down. The movie is weirdly fun and fraught with nervous tension, with many thanks to a terrific ensemble. Embry and Healy hold an easy rapport that ground their history and subsequent predicaments in the ever-mounting atmosphere of insanity. Additionally, those who come into the film with affection for the tenderness between Healy and Paxton in Ti West's THE INNKEEPERS will be granted an additional layer of shudder and devastation.

Comedic talent Koechner is really something here, though. Katz and the ANCHORMAN star use that widely recognized buffoon-ish persona to an incredible advantage. Colin wears that same no-filter, little-boundary, goofy good time air, but pushed to a frightening level when you realize not only is his intent entirely insidious, but he (and people like him) actually wields power over the proceedings, as well. That Katz utilizes Koechner, and the entire cast at large, so well is only one part in revealing CHEAP THRILLS as an accomplished, confident debut. His camera is the handheld of a low-budgeted feature, but mannered for maximum effect. The chaos of an untethered and ill-advised shaky-cam is eschewed for something with actual verisimilitude. The fact that these connecting characters do such things to each other and themselves is the real shock/surprise/fright/joke. There's a good deal of flourish, too. Framing the early scenes in the cheap red of the early dive is foreboding, and while instances of close-up don't have Craig or Vince break the fourth wall, they still do read as uncomfortably confrontational. Later, some of the best moments come when Katz lets scenes play out with full view of those in backgrounds and corners. It's a small cast, yes, but their looks, asides, whispers and texts across a living room create a nervous energy, like Craig is alone in a crowd.

Equally grin and wince-inducing, you could say CHEAP THRILLS has its cake and devours it too by both reveling in and mocking our love of others' misfortunes and anything-to-get-by rationalization, but really, that just makes it more of a subversive reflection.

