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Often, the stories that shake our skulls most are those that toy with the brain inside. Chad Crawford Kinkle’s debut feature JUG FACE, which premiered at this year’s Slamdance, does just that. Bearing themes similar to THE VILLAGE, RED STATE, KILL LIST and THE WOMAN (the latter also produced by Andrew van den Houten), the film is set in a cultish backwoods community, one developed far outside the norms of contemporary societal ideologies and customs. Read on for comments by van den Houten and others on the JUG FACE team, and a few exclusive pics.

Ada (Lauren Ashley Carter, pictured below) has been impregnated by her brother Jessaby (Daniel Manche)—but that’s not the only bind she’s in. In the town lies a pit containing a deadly creature, and potter Dawai (Sean Bridgers) has crafted a ceramic face on a jug, representing the candidate that said creature wants sacrificed. Surprise! It’s Ada. Determined to save her child, she hides the jug in the woods—yet if she doesn’t turn herself in, it is said that death will come to the rest of the villagers.

It’s a twisted idea, and one that, depending on the viewer, holds the potential for political, religious and/or social allegory, not to mention issues of sexuality and womanhood. Sean Young, who plays Ada’s mother Loriss says, “To me, the pit represents corporatocracy—that she sacrificed everything to this group. That’s how I read it.” Kinkle responds, “It could be seen as that, or religion, or community and family.”

Carter previously played Peggy Cleek in THE WOMAN (which also co-starred Bridgers), and here once again essays a young woman trapped within an isolated system of control. Both are possible victims of incest—though since Ada’s world is more confined, it seems to be all she knows. This element of an inescapable family tree only adds to the film’s sense of suffocation. “This is a group of people who have been together since the settlers,” Kinkle says, “so there are only so many families. They’re all going to be related at a certain point.”

The idea for the film came to Kinkle during a visit to a folk pottery museum in Georgia, where he saw a gruesome face jug for the first time. “I thought immediately, ‘I have to have one of those,’ ” he recalls. After watching an instructional video at the museum with potter Lunier Meaders, Kinkle knew he had a story. “It felt like he was talking about backwoods black magic or something. So I immediately saw a potter possessed, making a jug with a girl’s face on it.” Meaders drew his clay from a pit, spawning the idea for the movie’s mysterious chasm.

Another influence was Shirley Jackson’s story “The Lottery.” “What scares me is communities,” Kinkle says, “this strange communal mindset that can be twisted very quickly. In JUG FACE, what’s really scary is the group and what they’re doing, not the creature.”

“And the withholding of information,” Carter adds. “Who knows if Ada’s mother ever told her when she was becoming a woman what was happening to her, and how that made her feel.” Behold a bathroom scene that the cast is still cringing about. Carter continues, “The sense of being trapped and closed off is such a huge theme in the movie. Everything leads to a dead end, and that’s terrifying. Even if Ada ever did get out, what would she do? There’s a line where her father [played by Larry Fessenden, pictured below at left] comes to her and says, ‘Why couldn’t you come to us? Why couldn’t you tell us?’ But she was absolutely unable to, and that’s what leads to these tragic events.” The veil that is placed over the eyes of these characters is what renders them immobile.

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