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:: Bitter & Twisted

Bitter & Twisted begins with the death of a pivotal yet hardly seen character named Liam (Jeremy Brennan). As the paramedics try to revive him, his family watches on as his face is awash with flashing red and blue emergency lights. It is a bleak yet important scene which sets up the plot, tone and visual style for the film which focuses on the aftermath of Liam's death 3 years down the line.

The spotlight is thrown and stays on four key characters: Liam's father Jordan (Steve Rodgers), a car salesman facing the axe, who has succumbed to comfort eating and is now obese as a result; mother Penelope (Noni Hazlehurst) who has deluded herself into thinking she is pregnant and looks outside of her marriage for sexual gratification; and younger brother Ben (Christopher Weekes, who also wrote and directed the film) is struggling with his sexual identity, forming a relationship with a playboy lover (Matthew Newton) whilst developing feelings for Liam's ex-girlfriend Indigo (Leeanna Walsman). She has entered into a relationship with a married man (Gary Sweet).

All four characters carry with them a heavy burden spurred on by despair, grief and guilt. Smiles are hard to come by here; only the youngest sibling Lisa (Basia A'hern) seems to have adjusted. Everyone else, though, is stuck in a rut and refuses to listen to the most basic of advice: life goes on. Similar territory was touched upon in Ten Empty, another local film released earlier in the year, and much like it Bitter & Twisted continues with Australian filmmaker's fascination with suburbia, which is always portrayed as bleak and stilted. However, unlike Ten Empty, this film is less about a family purging its guilt via shock drama moments and almost satiric depiction of life in the 'burbs.

The acting here is admirable, especially by Steve Rodgers who delivers a soul crushingly depressing turn, and Noni Hazlehurst who is simply a well of emotion. Minor turns by Matthew Newton and Gary Sweet are charmingly effective. Surprisingly - considering the subject matter and how it is approached - Bitter & Twisted does not come off as pretentious in any way. And while there are awkward and tense moments - Walsman confronting Sweet with a baseball bat while in his home; Hazlehurst attempt at cheating on her husband - they do not come off as over the top.

This is due to writer/director Christopher Weekes choice handling of his material. The films tone is consistent, and Weekes' sharp visual eye and technical smarts bring about some surprises, most notably a swirling 360 camera shot used to startling effect, and a well used rumbling sound effect which warns of the storm clouds overhead (of which this film has plenty).

Title: Bitter & Twisted
Director: Christopher Weekes
Released By: Australian Film Syndicate
Length: 90 min
Rating: M
Production: Casp Productions 2008
 Australia
Starring: Noni Hazlehurst, Steve Rodgers, Leeanna Walsman, Christopher Weekes, Rhys Muldoon, Matthew Newton, Basia A'Hern, Penne Hackforth-Jones, Jeremy Brennan, Gary Sweet

Reviewer: Matthew Pejko



A sombre film, Bitter & Twisted is not Friday night entertainment, but rather a poignant look at grief and its ramifications. Lookout for a number of AFI nominations in the year to come.

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