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Bitter and Twisted

Reviewed by Sandra Hall
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THE Lombards, in common with many other families in Australian films, are in trouble. Elder son Liam died suddenly in his 20s and, three years later, the family is still in limbo.

Jordan, Liam's father, looks for solace in food, overeating to the point where he has become grotesquely obese. Penelope, Liam's mother, is so frustrated by her husband's silences that she is on the brink of doing something desperate just to remind herself that she is alive. And Ben's fixation on his dead brother has inspired a crush on Indigo, Liam's former girlfriend.

The scene of all this angst is a suburb in Sydney's south, not far from the one chosen by the Edgerton brothers as the setting for their recent thriller, *The Square*. *Bitter & Twisted*, however, is no thriller. The only villain on show is Jordan's hot-tempered boss, Donald, a car dealer, played by Rhys Muldoon, spraying venom all over the scenery. Donald believes there's a time limit on grief and that Jordan's permit expired long ago. If he wants to keep his job, he's going to have to remember how to smile.

Bitter & Twisted is being marketed as the little film that could. It had a successful premiere at New York's Tribeca Film Festival in May and has since been seen in festivals in Sarajevo, Montreal and Dungog, where it was taken on by the new distribution company formed by the Dungog festival's organisers, Allannah Zitserman and Stavros Kazantzidis, in partnership with the former reviewer and man-about-film, Peter Castaldi. Palace then picked it up for immediate release at two of its cinemas in Sydney and Melbourne.

Written and directed by Christopher Weekes, who plays the role of Ben, it's a dreamy piece, part-suburban soap opera, part-fairytales. Weekes's mother died shortly before he finished the script and he says his own sense of dislocation did much to colour the film. It is as if Liam's loved ones are under a spell. Trapped among the green expanses, wide highways and shopping malls of their sprawling suburban landscape, they've become incapable of looking to the future.

Jordan (Steve Rodgers) retreats every day to the cemetery to sit on Liam's gravestone while Ben clings to another ritual. Each afternoon, he asks Indigo (Leeanna Walsman) to go for a walk with him. She lives across the road from the Lombards and is as grief-stricken as the rest of them. She knows what Ben is feeling yet can't make up her mind what to do about it and, as she hovers on the kerb, she and Ben seem lost in space, their figures outlined against the sky with the empty street between them.

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Indigo has also been trying to ease her grief with someone else. An affair with Greg (Gary Sweet), a local businessman, has brought some consolation. His wife, however, has just found him out and things are about to get ugly. But not yet. For now, the action is being played out in long silences, fractured exchanges and montages flipping us back and forth from one profoundly unhappy household to another.

Fortunately, Weekes has actors who know exactly how to offset these sad silences. Sweet executes an unnervingly plausible transition from slick flatterer to panicky householder, belatedly becoming aware of just what he's in danger of losing, and Matthew Newton brings some much-needed positive energy as Matt, a gay friend of Ben's with an extrovert disposition and an urge to initiate Ben in the joys of sexual adventure.

Noni Hazlehurst, too, gets to the heart of 53-year-old Penny, who feels so starved of attention that she's deluded herself into mistaking the symptoms of menopause for signs of pregnancy. She displays all the agonies of a can-do-character up against the wall, a predicament exacerbated by the fact that the wall in question happens to be the broad back of her husband. The weight that Jordan carries has become a prison, putting him far beyond her reach. She's tried everything she can think of - sweet words, new clothes, a different hairstyle - but in bed at night his back is resolutely turned on her. Then one evening, in an exquisitely awkward scene, she goes to a bar and allows herself to be picked up by a much younger man with an eerie resemblance to her dead son.

At other times, Liam really does appear, conjured up by the memories of those who long for him - a risky ploy but one Weekes orchestrates with an adroit merging of past and present. It's the limbo effect again. For those who have lost all belief in the future, it's as if suburbia itself has a narcotic effect.

Deserted by her husband, Indigo's mother (Penne Hackforth-Jones) has elected to sleep her days away, while Matt's widowed father has buried himself among his books and records in a grand but gloomy old Federation house, where he's gently lapsing into a permanent state of forgetfulness.

It's a film that demands that you slow your own pulse rate and surrender to its melancholy rhythms. As with so many young Australian filmmakers, Weekes isn't interested in having his characters sparkle. Conversations founder on nonsequiturs or come to a halt, stymied by a multiplicity of negatives. "I don't know", "I don't care" and the word "nothing" occur at regular intervals.

Listening to these bumpy exchanges, I kept thinking of Tamara Jenkins's *The Savages*, another recent film about loss, regeneration and the perils flowing from an inability to communicate. It's a very different film from this one, the reason being that Jenkins is mature enough to see the absurdities that make tragedy bearable. Here, tragedy equates with earnestness. Those wide green expanses are strangely airless. Yet they ring with truth, which, in the end, is what matters.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/09/19/1221331191893.html>