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## Bitter & Twisted

Howard Feinstein in New York

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THIS WEEK'S ISSUE




Dir. Christopher Weekes. 2008. Australia . 88 mins.

**It's a miracle when an untracked English-language film arrives on the scene - and a special joy when said movie is smashing. The 28-year-old Weekes and some of his friends made *Bitter & Twisted* themselves for around \$200,000. With no institutional support, they planned lighting and editing on a computer at home. The result is an ensemble piece about a family's reaction to son Liam's untimely death three years prior to events onscreen.**

With none of the sentiment of *The Son's Room* or others of the grief film genre, *Bitter & Twisted* is both astutely observed and beautifully shot. It hones in on the ongoing effects of such a trauma - the ones that seem forgotten or completely repressed - and masterfully shows how they continue to haunt survivors with nearly the same intensity as the memory of the loved one. Cheap sentiment is entirely absent; coping day to day is the struggle. Word should spread, festivals should take notice, and distributors who enjoy a challenge could do themselves proud with a film like this - which seems to mark a positive shift in Aussie exports.

The cast is superb. Icon Noni Hazelhurst, the Australian Judi Dench, plays Penelope, the bereaved mother, who, at 53, has deluded herself into thinking she might be pregnant. She just does not know what to do with herself. Perhaps this might have happened anyway, given that the film is set in the far southern reaches of Sydney, neighbourhoods so sterile and homogeneous that there are perhaps three styles of home to choose from; ugly facades with atrocious interiors.

Steve Rogers is sympathetic as Penelope's husband Jordan, who eats, binges in fact, to compensate for the loss, hangs out near his son's grave, and embarks upon a losing streak at the pathetic car dealership where he is supposed to put on a smile, lie, and sell. Weekes himself portrays surviving brother Ben, a lost, persistent soul who transfers his affection for his brother onto the boy's last girlfriend, Indigo (Walsman). Oedipal is the operative term here for most of Liam's intimates: Penelope picks up a young man who looks strikingly like her deceased son, as if lovemaking could bring him back to life. Indigo embarks on an affair with an older married man, a guarantee that this one will also not work out. A few minor subplots are extraneous - is Ben gay? - but they do not take anything away from the larger narrative.

In the opening shot, as Liam lies dying, colors spill all over his face. One might suspect that the *Strictly Ballroom* formula will be at play, but in fact it's just the opposite. Weekes is a master of color and f/x (he designs f/x to pay the rent), but he refuses to go for the obvious or the predictable. He does not present his characters as "other" - different from non-Australians - but similar to suburbanites anywhere who become locked in a prison of ennui. Yet he never loses sight of those cultural tics that do connote Australia. It's a delicate balance, but Weekes never crosses the line.

Throughout the film we see photos of Liam, and occasionally, quick shots of the boy through the mind's eye of one of the characters. Yes, he is still present in their lives. At a certain point, though, each of the survivors undergoes a delayed catharsis: he or she moves on, and a photograph of the family without Liam marks the passage to a new, more productive phase. Fittingly, Marianne Faithful sings *In My Time of Sorrow* at this point: "The time has come for me to say farewell." And they do. Life goes on.


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