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Tribeca film Festival Review: "Bitter & Twisted"

Posted by Phil Nugent

The Australian film *Bitter & Twisted*, a first film by the writer-director Christopher Weekes, is about a family that hasn't yet recovered from the suicide, three years ago, of the oldest son, Liam. Jordan (Steve Rodgers), a gentle, morbidly obese salesman as "Carn's Car Yard", spends part of



each day eating lunch while visiting Liam's grave. Jordan has shut down sexually, and his wife, Penny (Noni Hazlehurst), is in desperate need of being made to feel that she's still desirable. When her period is late, Penny is flustered at the thought of becoming pregnant at 53, then horrified to learn that she isn't pregnant, she's menopausal. She takes her unhappiness out on her teenage daughter, discovered a childish, scribbled love note in the girl's pocket and barging into her room to ask, "Are you having sex?" Weekes himself plays the younger son, Ben, who keeps showing up at the doorstep of his dead brother's girlfriend Indigo (Leeanna Walsman) and asking her if she'd like to go for a walk. (The sexually ambiguous Ben is being courted by a male friend who keeps a dead pet in the freezer in a plastic bag and recalls that he froze the animal "at the moment he was dying, just as he was reaching up for the light.") Indigo herself, when not humoring Ben with their walks, has taken refuge in an affair with an older, married man (Gary Sweet) and has just learned that *she's* pregnant. When she confronts her lover and her tells her how "complicated" things are, she replies, "This is something people say when they want to fuck you over and forgive themselves for it."

Bitter & Twisted feels underdeveloped in places, but it's also elliptical in the right ways: whatever reasons Liam had for his suicide are never made clear, and they don't really matter. The movie is about the people left behind, and about the different degrees to which each of them has chosen to remain paralyzed by grief, nursing it and refusing to move on. Jordan has reached the point where his body seems to be trying to either kill him or shock him back to life, and Penny has just started looking into the mirror and reeling from the discovery that time itself didn't freeze that day three years ago: the world has kept barreling ahead without them. *Bitter & Twisted* isn't quite a comedy, but despite its subject matter and the throbbing ache at its center, it's never merely a downer, either. The performances are superb, and the movie has a fresh, distinctive way of looking at its characters even when the story ends seem frayed. Weekes, who as an actor has some of the anguished angularity of the young Kyle MacLachlan, could turn out to be something special; his best work here already suggests an Australian Mike Leigh, without a political ax to grind.

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Posted May 02 2008, 10:00 AM

Filed under: [mike leigh](#), [phil nugentent](#), [christopher weekes](#), [nini hazlehurst](#), [leeana walsman](#), [bitter & twisted](#), [steve rogers](#), [gary sweet](#)

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