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★★★★ **Bitter & Twisted** (Christopher Weekes, 2008, Australia)

Rating M Running time 85 minutes

Review by Bernard Hemingway

Synopsis: The Lombard family has been steadily disintegrating since the death of oldest son Liam three years before. The father, car salesman Jordan (Steve Rodgers) is caught in a slough of depression and compulsive eating, mother Penny (Noni Hazlehurst) is starved of affection but believes that she may be pregnant. Son Ben (Christopher Weekes) is not sure if he is gay or straight but has a crush on his dead brother's ex-girlfriend (Leeanna Walsman) who is hurting bitterly after an affair with a married man (Gary Sweet).



Bitter & Twisted is an outstanding achievement for Christopher Weekes who wrote, directed, stars in and self-financed this challenging and poignant film. A first feature, it shows remarkable maturity, both emotionally and artistically, as it takes us inside the everyday heartache of an ordinary family. This is not the typically whimsical **Rage In Placid Lake**-like take on Australian suburban ennui, but rather a candid portrait of quietly banal desperation. It is an angle which is going to be film's greatest commercial hurdle, for despite its ultimately affirmative ending and Weekes' agreeably matter-of-fact observational approach it is not easy to watch so many people suffering life's unkindness. In this respect the film is mis-titled – it would have been more justly called "Misery". Everybody is miserable about something, the shadow of the dead Liam hanging over all as a daily reminder of what his silently grieving father refers to as "the possibilities he never had".

Weekes handles this difficult subject matter with insight and empathy and has with the help of his creative team crafted a film that whilst being familiar enough in narrative form speaks with an original and authentic voice enhanced by a nice choice of indie pop songs and a sensitive score by Brian Cachia. Whilst Weekes deserves full credit for both his script (the first draft of which he wrote at the breath-takingly young age of 20) and his

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skilful, carefully measured directing, much of the strength of the film comes from the fine cast. Noni Hazlehurst leads the way as the love-lorn, middle-aged Penny whilst Steve Rodgers is a remarkable find as the husband barely able to function, both psychologically and physiologically. Leeanna Walsman, who bears more than a passing resemblance to Kirsten Dunst, is equally an effective presence and one can only hope she goes as far as that actress has. Weekes himself does a fine job as her awkward admirer, whilst Matthew Newton steals every scene as Ben's metrosexual friend. Gary Sweet and Rhys Muldoon fill out the minor roles.

Given its self-financing origins, **Bitter & Twisted** once again demonstrates that our most interesting films come from a strong individual voice rather than the winnowing processes of a grant system. Shot on 16mm, it is not technically flawless, there being occasional fluctuations in picture and audio quality and this and the no doubt limited budget has perhaps limited the editing options but pound for pound it is a real contender for the best Australian film of the year. Take the trouble to see it. It is a film that deserves attention.