

Fantasia Day 1, Part One - "RED STATE"

Written by Ariel Esteban Cayer
Friday, 15 July 2011 15:21



Fantasia 2011 kicked off in full force yesterday, with the hotly anticipated Canadian premiere of Kevin Smith's RED STATE. I had spent the day finishing off various writing assignments, unable to shake the anxiety that reading the fine print of my press pass - which read "[this pass] is not valid for the Opening and Closing films" - had stirred within me. I was already devising sneaky schemes in my head as to how I was going to get in - and turn this blog into more exciting read in the process! - but I quickly learned, in my first hours as a journalist, that seeing your name on "the list" does feel good. After Fantasia programmer extraordinaire, Mitch Davis, introduced me to the expectedly impressive Udo Kier, who was casually wandering the Hall Theater entrance, I found my way in like a kid in a candy shop (every year, the same feeling) and sat in the back with my longtime DJ friends, Iddle Matt and Angelica from CJLO, who always spin awesome tunes between the screenings.

The squeaking of seats my butt has grown so accustomed to over the years and the loud chatter of enthused fans started filling the theater. I introduced myself to Shade Rupe (DARK STARS RISING), who happened to be sitting two seats from me and waited for RED STATE to begin. As a fan of Smith's varying successes within comedy, I was anxious to see how he would translate his particular - arguably declining - wit to horror. To be brutally honest, I was expecting a wreck. Following some obligatory corporate acknowledgments, Mitch hit the stage running and introduced the film, as well as Smith's pre-recorded introduction to the film. At that point, it had become clear that Smith wasn't going to make an appearance. So having him hilariously apologize (anyone having seen glimpses of AN EVENING WITH KEVIN SMITH know he's a terrific talker) was an excellent touch and helped set the tone for the total surprise that was going to be RED STATE. The lights dimmed and something quite rare happened: I witnessed as the train wreck I was anticipating became a slick and thrilling torpedo to the gut.

"How much do you think a cross like this cost?"

"In dollars or in common sense?"

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Mostly talked about for the controversy surrounding its distribution, Kevin Smith's RED STATE shattered the audience's expectations yesterday, as we saw "the CLERKS guy" – as Smith sardonically calls himself, but which I consider unfair in light of great films such as CHASING AMY and, yes, CLERKS II – come of age as a writer/director and deliver one gripping thrill ride. In fact, it's possibly one of the best films of the year.

After initially following a trio of very Middle-American teenagers (Michael Angarano, Nicholas Braun and Kyle Gallner of JENNIFER'S BODY, A HAUNTING IN CONNECTICUT and RED) attempting to score some cheap white-trash sex via a hook-up website, delivering a satisfying dose of Smith's trademark immature humor and relatable male camaraderie, RED STATE quickly shifts gears as the inevitable ambush is revealed and the trio find themselves in the claws of the deadly Pastor Abin Cooper (a fascinating Michael Parks, modeled after Westboro Baptist Church's Fred Phelps) and his family of demented Christian fundamentalists.



Stunning in about every aspect, RED STATE works equally as severe critique of Christian fundamentalism (or any religious extremism, for that matter) as well as a moral riddle pitting two factions of society against each other, with a third caught in the crossfire; dynamically and brilliantly underlined in the closing credits, which are divided in the following way: The Sex, The Religion, The Politics. The moral dilemma that quickly arises from the explosive situation will have you take sides immediately and while the outcome will not be what you might have wanted, it is undeniable that Smith knows what buttons to push and what strings to pull in order to create a totally unexpected roller-coaster ride.

What starts as a teen trio dynamic quickly evolves into an excellently orchestrated ensemble piece and Smith, with some carefully placed shock kills, manages to create a brutal atmosphere of relentless tension. Smith's voice shines not only through the smart dialogue, but also through the unpredictable structure, which, towards the end, recalls the excellent work of the Coen brothers (!), namely BURN AFTER READING's delightful nihilism. Smith knows when and how

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to pull the rug from under you, keeping you on the edge of your seat the whole time, something that very few films are genuinely able to achieve nowadays. John Goodman gives a stellar performance as ATF Special Agent Keenan, who gives voice to much of the audience's emotions and provides Smith with an on-screen alter-ego, through which the politic and moral implications are made (perhaps a little bit too) clear. The closing segment, starring the absolutely wonderful Patrick Fischler (MAD MEN, LOST) will have you grinning all over again, but most importantly catching your breath; showing Smith's mastery of storytelling beats in an unprecedented way.

Cinematographer David Klein, whom you could never tell has been the man behind the camera of most of Smith's films to date, makes brilliant use of both handheld camera and sweeping tracking shots, allowing Smith to express an unexpected mastery of visual language, while retaining a certain DIY, guerrilla quality to the whole aesthetic.

Rounded up by a supporting cast including a haunting Melissa Leo, Ralph Garman and newcomer Kerry Bishé, as well as beautifully minimal sound design, RED STATE is an enormous surprise and this is only Day 1. I left the theater exhilarated. Flaws were discussed, such as Smith's occasional failings as a dramatic writer and moralist, but overall, RED STATE remains a most excellent way to open the fest.



Next up: CHOP and the traditional Fantasia After-Party!