

“THE REEF” (DVD/Blu-ray Review)

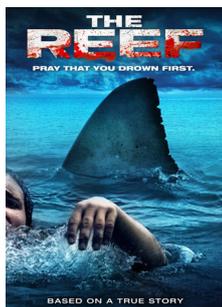
Written by Michael Gingold

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Just when you thought it was safe to assume that all sharks in independent genre flicks were harmless CGI specimens, here comes THE REEF (just out on DVD and Blu-ray from Image Entertainment, and also showcased this past weekend at Montreal's [Fantasia festival](#)), an Australian production that drops you and four unfortunate souls into the middle of the Pacific Ocean with a real great white shark in a chill-inducing manner.

THE REEF follows in the tradition of writer/director Andrew Traucki's BLACK WATER (which he created with David Nerlich), incorporating a real predator into a saga of aquatic survival. The wonderfully named Damian Walshe-Howling stars as Luke, who invites three friends—Matt (Gyton Grantley), his girlfriend Suzie (Adrienne Pickering) and his sister Kate (Zoe Naylor)—along with longtime sailor Warren (Kieran Darcy-Smith) on a yacht trip that will take them past the Great Barrier Reef. It's a scenic voyage with a stop at a lovely little island that gives former lovers Matt and Kate the chance to rekindle their relationship...or not.



Unfortunately for all involved, those tensions are soon superseded by an accident that leaves the boat capsized, the quintet forced to clamber onto the bottom of the overturned vessel, pondering their next move. The choices are quickly narrowed down to two: stay safely atop the craft and hope a passing boat or plane spots them as the current takes them further out to sea, or take a chance and swim for an island they know is about 10 miles away. In one of the movie's reversals of expectation, the more experienced Warren, rather than taking charge of the escape plan, is the one who right away elects to stay atop the boat, since “I know what's out there.”

We know what's out there too, of course, and Traucki builds a nice sense of nervous anticipation as he leads his principals closer to becoming stranded in the feeding ground of the “white pointer” (as the local parlance refers to it). He takes his time allowing us to get to know and like the young characters, so that when, at about the halfway point, they set off across the open water, the camera hovering at surface level with them and dropping below the drink as Luke scans around for danger, we share the tension of the situation.

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Did I say “open water”? Yes, the previous indie hit of that title comes to mind, and JAWS can’t help but come up as well when talking about films spotlighting the most notorious of all shark species. But the dynamic of THE REEF is a little different from that of OPEN WATER, as the four swimmers are stalked by a lone killing machine, and few past movies have utilized the real thing, much less as adroitly as this one. Often taking Luke’s point of view, Traucki’s camera drops below the surface as the huge fish slowly hovers into view...circles...turns and slowly approaches...and then lunges in for the attack, the toothy killer flawlessly and scarily composited with footage of the floating cast. Beyond its far more convincing finned monster, THE REEF also boasts better acting and more attractive production values (such as Daniel Ardilley’s sharp cinematography, Peter Crombie’s taut editing and Rafael May’s eerie score) than most of its terror-from-the-depths ilk.

The images shine on the discs’ crisp 2.35:1 transfers, for which the sole noteworthy supplement is the 24-minute featurette “THE REEF—Shooting With Sharks.” This should absolutely not be watched before the movie, as seeing the cast performing their waterbound scenes just a few dozen yards from the safety of a beach kinda kills the mood. Through this location footage and on-camera interviews, the segment covers the basics of the writing and casting, with Traucki briefly explaining the true story that inspired the film and praising the actors, and the actors praising each other, and becomes more fun when they share their own shark stories. Inevitably, the most interesting section covers the filming of the real great whites, with one terrific bit where a camera is almost swallowed and we briefly get a point of view from behind a row of sharp teeth. We hear from visual FX supervisor Doug Bayne here too, though disappointingly, we don’t get a visual step-by-step of how the shark and its victims were visually brought together.

MOVIE: 

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