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Two feature films in, and UK-based director Ben Wheatley has already carved out a personality and style that’s recognizable as all his own. His first effort, DOWN TERRACE, was a blackly funny and affecting Ben Wheatley crime picture. Now, KILL LIST, premiering at SXSW as part of the SXFantastic section, is a blackly funny, disturbingly violent and equally effective Ben Wheatley horror film.

KILL LIST’s genre particulars shouldn’t be spoiled, as the uncertainty of its direction, and even its place in the horror field, are half the joy. For much of its running time, KILL LIST is concerned with out-of-work Jay (Neil Maskell), who’s beginning to feel crushed under the pressures of financial strains and marital troubles. Reluctant to return to his previous profession of contract kiling, he eventually agrees after an explosive dinner party with wife Shel (THE DESCENT’s MyAnna Buring), longtime best friend, military mate and fellow hitman Gal (Michael Smiley) and Gal’s new squeeze Fiona (Emma Fryer). Jay and Gal are led to a job in which the “kill list” triggers a descending journey into something much bigger and more horrifying.

DOWN TERRACE saw the filmmaker apply a very rough, handheld aesthetic which is also employed here, but combined with a more polished, most likely bigger-budgeted and ultimately more assured feel. Thankfully, Wheatley shows he’s still a confrontational filmmaker who lays bare all forms of violence (terribly uncomfortable and frank marital arguments, as well as frightening and possibly sickening matter-of-fact displays of realistic and graphic gore). KILL LIST is structured in very specific acts, and the picture’s eerier moments don’t seep in for quite a while—which works to both its advantage and possible detriment. By dropping in the more familiar aspects of horror (though the earlier arguments and violent deaths are still, in a sense, scary and skin-crawling) late in the game, Wheatley spends a real and engrossing amount of time with his cast of characters, pacing Jay’s spiral in a believable manner. And while the third act and finale will absolutely stay with you, it’s possibly a little too ambiguous and late of a reveal for its specific subtext to take hold.

Nonetheless, KILL LIST may well leave audiences speechless. Its four leads contribute truly terrific, well-rounded work that help craft Jay’s gradual steps toward a scary, savage final destination—one that leaves the viewer begging for more Ben Wheatley horror films.

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