

“RED STATE” (Fantasia Film Review)

Written by Allan Dart
Friday, 15 July 2011 11:28



Can Kevin Smith direct a horror film? Well, I wouldn't really qualify RED STATE (which served as the opening-night movie at this year's [Fantasia festival](#)) as a fright flick *per se*, but the director of CLERKS and ZACK AND MIRI MAKE A PORNO most certainly has made a bold departure from his comedic cinema, and delivered an effectively disturbing and dramatic film with horrific elements that focuses on religious fundamentalism and extremism at its worst. Yes, folks, there's another side to Smith as a director, a dark side—and he successfully taps into it with RED STATE. And those looking for cameo appearances by Jay and Silent Bob will be in for a surprise...

RED STATE is a movie that, when reviewing, the less said about the better, so don't expect major spoilers or plot points here. I would suggest that those interested in seeing Smith's film avoid checking out more revelatory critiques, as part of the pleasure of viewing RED STATE for the first time is being a cinematic bystander watching to see what direction Smith is going to take you in. The film (which clocks in at a brief 97 minutes) is divided into three sections. The first introduces us to a trio of high-school buddies: Travis (Michael Angarano), Billy-Ray (Nicholas Braun) and Jarod (Kyle Gallner). They're your typical horny adolescents who check out a hookup website and set up a sexual rendezvous with a woman who doesn't live far from their small town. However, when the boys show up at the lady's trailer, things don't go quite as expected.



RED STATE's second focal point is the hard-right Christian congregation known as the Five Pointers, led by Pastor Cooper (Michael Parks). They're a small but faithful flock who vehemently hate homosexuality and stage protests in which they spout “the word of the Lord” and declare that hell and eternal damnation await all those who participate in such vile, unnatural acts. The Cooper clan is also made up of the pastor's wife Sara (Melissa Leo), her daughter Cheyenne (Kerry Bishé) and their younger children. As Smith has previously stated, the pastor is loosely inspired by Fred Phelps, the controversial founder of the Westboro Baptist

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Church, and Parks delivers a dynamic, convincing performance as a dangerously pious man who has an unwavering and steadfast conviction in his God-fearing beliefs, but no tolerance for anybody else's. He's a righteous man who only sees wrong in those who don't subscribe to his overzealous doctrine.

And that's as far as I'll journey into the story of RED STATE. Kevin Pollak and John Goodman are also in the film, and the latter plays a crucial part in the intense third act. But to disclose who Goodman essays and how he gets involved with those three boys and Pastor Cooper's church would be a dead giveaway as to where RED STATE is heading. Suffice to say, the direction isn't a delightful one.

If you've seen a Kevin Smith film, you're in for a shocking surprise with his latest, and apparently penultimate, film. A far cry from his point-and-shoot style, RED STATE gives us a Smith who wields his RED camera with a striking intensity and pours on the tension via shaky camerawork, elliptical editing and frenzied framing. Smith is in control of his dramatic and often violent material, and this is his best directorial work to date. Equally strong are the actors' performances, with Parks and Goodman giving particularly memorable turns.

But while the movie has many strengths, it isn't without its weaknesses. At just over an hour and a half, RED STATE would've benefitted from another half-hour of running time. We don't really get to know the three boys well enough, and Smith's script could've delved deeper into the Five Pointers' faithful and how their blind and twisted faith leads them down a very dark and un-Christian road. Additionally, like a comedic actor approaching their first dramatic role, Smith sometimes falls back on his humorous inclinations and disposition—and not always to good effect. There are some laughs in this, for the most part, serious story, and although several are to good effect, others take away from the tragedy that ensues. And while Parks, Goodman, Leo and Bishé deliver standout characterizations, a few of the supporting roles are nothing more than broad caricatures.

In spite of those shortcomings, RED STATE is, overall, an effective and compelling film that is unlike anything Smith has ever tackled before. Shocking, violent and no-holds-barred, it delivers the dramatic goods, and while I would've liked to have seen him explore RED STATE's themes, subject matters and characters even further, what he does provide is a relevant and intelligent examination of not simply religious or far-right extremism, but the underlying, ingrained and potentially violent nature of *any* human belief system.

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