TAKE SHELTER proves that when the right filmmaker and actor are involved, the hint of the possibility of violence can make an audience just as uneasy as the direct threat of it. In this case, the filmmaker is Jeff Nichols and the actor is Michael Shannon, and that underlying tension is just one of the things that makes the movie so quietly powerful.

Shannon plays Curtis LaForche, an Ohio husband (to Samantha, played by Jessica Chastain), father (to hearing-impaired Hannah, played by Tova Stewart) and blue-collar worker (SPLINTER and MACHETE’s Shea Whigham plays his partner on construction jobs). Curtis has the common concerns about making ends meet and providing for his family, but before the movie ever addresses those, it shows us that he’s got a lot more worrying him. The opening scene finds him in the midst of a dream of a threatening storm encroaching on his home—the first in a series of frightening dreamtime visions that convince him that disaster will soon befall him and his loved ones.

Are these truly prophecies of horrible events to come, or are they simply nightmares, manifestations of other concerns troubling his mind? Nichols keeps you nervously wondering

throughout, though that’s not TAKE SHELTER’s foremost concern. Front and center is the way Curtis’ nightmares impact his waking behavior, in ways that seem increasingly irrational. Obsessed about protecting his family, he ironically winds up threatening their livelihood, sinking money he doesn’t have into a front-yard project that consumes his attention. And yet he keeps his fears bottled up inside, refusing to reveal them to the increasingly concerned Samantha. Although his actions are clearly motivated by his love for his wife and little girl, a disturbing undercurrent builds beneath the story, suggesting that his unhinged mind might eventually lead them to physical harm.

All of this is played with quiet power by Nichols and Shannon, who has memorably gone off the deep end in movies and TV ranging from William Friedkin’s BUG to TV’s BOARDWALK EMPIRE, yet has never done so with quite the coiled, interior intensity he brings to Curtis. Keeping sympathy for this man even at his most mentally unsound is crucial to TAKE SHELTER’s success, and with the exception of a late-coming public outburst, Shannon creates a portrait of a man desperately trying to keep a lid on his mania, in such a way that you can’t help feeling for Curtis. He conveys Curtis’ private terror so convincingly that his every outward action feels understandable, perhaps relatable in some ways, even as you wait nervously for his demons to consume him and create hell for those around him.

Shannon is matched scene for scene by Chastain, revealing once again that she deserves every bit of her 2011 It Girl status. As Samantha tries to hold her family together while its provider is falling apart, Chastain movingly balances her love and devotion to Curtis with growing desperation, and together the two actors create a fully formed portrait of a marriage under pressure. Young newcomer Stewart, actually deaf in real life, is effortlessly naturalistic as Hannah, while Kathy Baker has a brief but impactful turn as Curtis’ mother, who offers hints, if not quite a full explanation, for Curtis’ state of mind.

Moving a bit up the budget scale from his debut feature SHOTGUN STORIES while still maintaining an independent aesthetic, Nichols delivers a film that captures the suburban Midwest milieu just right, without condescension or sentimentality, and links its day-to-day anxieties with the particulars of Curtis’ more extreme paranoia. Adam Stone’s widescreen cinematography helps tie it all together, juxtaposing images of unforced beauty with suggestively ominous visuals (the latter in tandem with the stormy visual FX by the hy*drau"lx company), as does David Wingo’s moving and haunting music.

TAKE SHELTER is a slow burn, one whose genre bona fides shouldn’t be overstated at the risk of disappointing those who might go expecting a more graphic portrait of disturbed behavior. It’s first and foremost an absorbing portrait of an ordinary man in the grip of what he

fears may become extraordinary circumstances, and it maintains an apprehensive hold on the viewer from first scene to last.