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BENEATH THE DARKNESS is also beneath Dennis Quaid, though there is some appeal in watching the latest good-lookin’ star try on the psychopath hat in a villainous character turn. His maniacal hijinx as small-Texas-town mortician Vaughn Ely provide a few of the intermittent pleasures in a film that otherwise doesn’t have much of a pulse.

BENEATH THE DARKNESS, opening in limited theatrical release today from Image Entertainment, isn’t so much an outright horror film as a mystery/suspense-thriller, albeit one without much mystery to it. We’re shown in the very first couple of minutes that Vaughn likes to cause dead bodies in addition to treating them, before the story jumps ahead two years to focus on teenage Travis (Tony Oller) and his high-school friends. Travis, who lost his older sister when he was a little boy, does lawn work for Vaughn, whose beloved wife Rosemary died a couple of years earlier, suggesting a sort of kinship between the two. Meanwhile, one of Travis’ teachers/coaches shows an almost predatory interest in him, and we learn that his English teacher was the wife of the guy Vaughn bumped off in that prologue, but none of these plot threads are followed or explored.

Instead, Bruce Wilkinson’s script centers on Travis, his girlfriend Abby (Aimee Teegarden) and a couple of pals as they start to believe Vaughn might be up to no good. Spying on him late one night, they see the silhouettes of a couple dancing in an upstairs window, and observe that the female figure is moving oddly, but somehow don’t come to the realization that will be immediately obvious to anyone watching the movie. Instead, they suspect ghostly activity—part of a supernatural element that also doesn’t get developed very far and never pays off.

What terrors there are remain earthbound, and director Martin Guigui stages a couple of scenes of violence that make the viewer sit up and take notice. They’re too few and far between, however, in a film largely concerned with a pedestrian plot in which Travis, with Abby’s help, does everything he can to convince the authorities that Vaughn’s a baddie. This is some police force the town has; only hours after one murder, the sergeant (Brett Cullen) announces they’ve concluded their investigation and that the death was an accident, even though, when we see the victim on Vaughn’s slab, he’s got a big shoeprint on his face. (The idea of Vaughn preparing his own casualties for burial is another promising gambit that the movie does nothing with.)

Quaid seems to be having fun as Vaughn keeps putting one over on the dumb cops and torments the youths, but there’s nowhere for his character to go, because everything about him is either revealed or obvious from the start. We eventually do learn a little more about his history, pertaining to that opening scene, but it’s as pedestrian a backstory as they come. The younger actors all go through their paces earnestly, with Oller doing his best to make Travis’ sometimes implausible actions seem convincingly motivated by guilt. It’s an early sign of BENEATH THE DARKNESS’ obviousness that this theme is set up in the first act by having Travis be the only one in his English class to realize that the protagonist in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” is motivate by his troubled conscience. Given the way in which Vaughn likes to dispose of his victims, the kids would have been better off studying “The Premature Burial” instead.