Nebraska filmmaker Patrick Rea and his SenoReality Pictures company (co-founded by Rea, Ryan S. Jones and Josh Robison) have been slowly but surely building a name for themselves on the regional independent horror scene. They have honed their craft as a seemingly inexhaustible wellspring of short films—two of which, WOMEN’S INTUITION and GET OFF MY PORCH, have won regional Emmys—and saw their first feature THE EMPTY ACRE released in 2007. And they’ve continued to do so in their second feature, NAILBATER.

Scripted by Rea and Kendall Sinn, NAILBITER begins with a woman and her three teenage daughters piling into a car to go pick up Dad at Kansas City International Airport, despite a forecast of severe weather in the area. Before they can reach their destination, they find themselves in the path of an oncoming tornado and are forced to seek shelter in the cellar of the first house they see in a podunk little town called Wellsville. After the storm passes, our four frantic females find themselves threatened by someone—or some*thing*—not quite human that seems intent on trapping them in the basement.

Rea’s focus on identifiable, believable characters caught up in sinister situations has made his shorts a breath of fresh air in an era that has seen horror largely swallowed up by endless remakes, gory misanthropy and Troma-esque splatstick. NAILBITER continues this trend; it’s a character-heavy monster flick more akin to THE DESCENT, with shades of THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE and THE HOWLING. Shot on the hi-def RED camera, NAILBITER is gorgeous to look at, even in the confines of the grimy country basement. Its visual and creature FX heavily favor physical creations over digital, save for the early tornado sequence, and viewers nostalgic for practical makeup and puppetry will likely find NAILBITER’s approach to their liking. The film provides mostly incomplete glimpses of the beings terrorizing the trapped family, not unlike the way JAWS and ALIEN shied away from giving us whole, prolonged looks at their monsters.

The sound design is also topnotch, and the film’s use of the storm season’s unsettling hallmarks, such as the National Weather Service’s robotic warning voice, the sirens and TV/radio weathermen telling people there’s serious badness on the way, are particularly effective in evoking early dread. The cast, lead by Erin McGrane as mother Janet and Meg Saricks as contrary eldest daughter Jennifer, are game and fulfill their roles quite nicely, with Joicie Appell a standout in the supporting role of (apparently) lovable grandma Mrs. Shurman.

The film is not entirely smooth sailing, though. There are a couple of odd plot issues that, while they don’t derail the film, can give viewers momentary pause. The biggest example is the seeming lack of damage after the tornado has blown over. While the ladies are in the basement, a tree blows over on top of the external doors; we thus assume there must be damage to some degree topside, yet when we’re shown things going on above ground, there doesn’t seem to be any harm to the house or surrounding area at all. However, as a Kansan myself—one who spent eight years working in Emergency Services, no less—I can vouch from personal experience that tornadoes can be wildly unpredictable. They can be incredibly unstable—changing directions, ascending and descending, even dissipating and reforming seemingly at random. As locals, Rea and Sinn know this, but there are many people in the rest of the world who won’t, and may well be perplexed as to why there’s seemingly no damage to the house despite the previous depiction of a tornado capable of crushing a water tower like a tin can bearing down on our desperate heroines. (I would have to guess that budgetary considerations played a part in downplaying this element.)

On the other hand, Rea and Sinn have worked in some deliberate—and devious—surprises throughout the story. Two-thirds of the way through, it seems absolutely clear how the story is going to end; then a surprise encounter with seven minutes or so left destroys those expectations. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew the filmmakers had enjoyed a good chuckle, knowing they were going to throw off those of us who’ve spent years watching this type of film and have grown used to its conventions. NAILBITER leaves at least two story threads potentially unresolved at its conclusion, leaving plenty of room for a follow-up in a fashion that isn’t as irritating as the last-minute reversal-of-fate jump-scare we usually get. Some will love this approach and some will likely find it irritating, but I can certainly say that I wanted to see what would happen next.

If Rea and SenoReality are planning a longer series involving this universe, its characters and its unique spin on a traditional monster—trust me, you’ll understand what I mean when you see it—I look forward to future installments. While NAILBITER suffers a few plot hiccups, Rea keeps most everything else running smoothly and effectively, resulting in an indie horror feature capable of providing actual tension and suspense, and should establish Rea and

SenoReality as two names for horror enthusiasts to watch for in the future.