The initial conceit of CROPSEY, an investigation into what is essentially an urban legend come to life, is enough to scare you without even seeing it. A very personal story for its two directors, Barbara Brancaccio and Joshua Zeman, as they examine a tale closely tied into their adolescence, the movie becomes instantly relatable and universal when viewers realize they grew up hearing any number of similar tales—and captures the sheer terror that they may, even to the smallest degree, be based on truth.

The film, which begins its commercial release today at New York City’s IFC Center (go here for more details on these and other screenings) isn’t exactly about the origins of the “Cropsey” myth—an urban legend from upstate New York summer camps, often revolving around a judge or camp employee seeking revenge for his burned-down house and murdered wife and child, complete with a hook for a hand. Rather, it notes how the story traveled down the Hudson River to the secluded borough of Staten Island (a place with enough spooky atmosphere to begin with) and soon became synonymous with a series of horrifying child disappearances. To the children of Staten Island, especially Brancaccio and Zeman, the abductions became the work of Cropsey; for the area’s parents, a man named Andre Rand, an orderly at the abandoned Willowbrook State School, was to blame, and eventually successfully prosecuted and sent to jail.

The question of whether Rand is guilty or not, while still up for debate, is also not CROPSEY’s focus. It’s definitely very much asked and addressed, but the true query seems to be ‘Why is it so hard to definitively prove he is the bogeyman?’—which derives from the complexity of not only Rand’s case, but the era in which the crimes occurred and the meeting point of legend and

truth. Along their onscreen journey, Brancaccio and Zeman interview a very wide array of people, from all spectrums and sides of the story, and what quickly becomes clear is how each person’s take differs ever so slightly from the others—much in the way urban legends are made up of certain core roots, but as they travel, the type of tree or leaves attached changes.

Brancaccio and Zeman revel in this for a good part of the running time, and it’s engrossing, since Rand, the abductions and the setting are all coincidentally shrouded in unnerving mystery and circumstances. Willowbrook was notoriously shuttered after the press uncovered its godawful conditions and overcrowding. Once the place became “that abandoned mental institution in the woods,” stories began to spread of its massive tunnel system connecting the large campus and the community of former patients living there. Rand’s mother was in a similar facility, making him now the homeless, drifter son of an insane woman. And to top it off, “satanic panic” had reached its height at the time, rife with tales of occult rites in the Island’s heavily wooded areas (which may still be going on; a scene in which the filmmakers revisit the asylum grounds at night provides a genuine scare).

CROPSEY is at its best when exploring the theme of adults having just as many urban legends as children, and how they differ. The interviews with family members, search-party volunteers and New York City cops are fascinating demonstrations of how rumors can spread and their details can change. Throughout, Zeman and Brancaccio navigate it all quite gracefully, and the movie becomes even more unsettling once they begin a communication with the incarcerated Rand, and it becomes clear that, guilty or not, Rand is some sort of bogeyman, clearly toying with the duo and their intentions.

Because CROPSEY touches on so many issues raised by the crimes and their relationship to urban myth, the film does feel like it’s taking on too much at times. There’s an overwhelming feeling when one thinks about just how much the directors had to wade through to bring the movie to some sort of completion; even as the closing credits appear, you know it isn’t really the end. Depending on your outlook, it may be the problem that the film offers few clear answers, and some might leave thinking that any subject documented in such a fashion from here on out warrants second-guessing. Others—like this reviewer—will see it as a testament to just how harrowing the whole ordeal is, and once you get to thinking about stories from your own home town, it will truly stick with you.

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