

“THE BLACK WATERS OF ECHO’S POND” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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The title of THE BLACK WATERS OF ECHO’S POND is a tad misleading, inasmuch as the action doesn’t take place around the titular body of water. “Echo’s Pond” is a facet of an ancient board game that causes all the trouble for the characters and is one of the unique features of this indie chiller, whose actual setting (an isolated vacation house on an island off the coast of Maine) is rather more generic.

Calling it an “ancient game,” in truth, is also something of a misnomer, as an opening prologue reveals that it was constructed only decades ago based on guidelines unearthed in a Turkish tomb (hence its instructional cards in English) and caused the deaths of a group who played it, the last survivor hiding it “where no one will ever find it” before blowing his brains out. In the present day, it’s rather easily unearthed by Anton (Arcadiy Golubovich), who has brought his new fiancée Erica (Elise Avellan) to the house for a weekend vacation, along with a bunch of friends. There are couples Renee, Erica’s twin sister (Electra Avellan) and Josh (Nick Mennell), Kathy (Danielle Harris) and Trent (Walker Howard), plus Trent’s pal Rob (M.D. Walton) and B-movie actress Veronique (Mircea Monroe), who’s got “new boobs” that we get to inspect in an obligatory shower scene. And then there’s Rick (James Duval), whose presence is a surprise to some of the others, given that he’s been persona non grata to the gang ever since a past tragedy.



With the island’s shotgun-toting caretaker Pete (Robert Patrick) lurking on the sidelines, the group decide to give the game a whirl after Anton brings it up from its former hiding place in the cellar. It’s an impressively wrought creation, with spooky details and unexpected moving parts, and the play is based on the group revealing their personal secrets, lusts and jealousies based on the directions of those cards. What we already know is that the game’s object is to invoke

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the elder god Pan, who thrives on anarchy (i.e. Pandemonium). But even before the friends start giving in to their baser instincts, Pan shows up on screen as a goat-headed demon who briefly spooks a couple of folks in the early going.

That may be because the emotional conflicts and physical mayhem don't really get cooking until the film's halfway point. Yet up till then, there are a few awkward cuts ahead in time, as if whole scenes have been excised to get to the meat of the tale—moments which might have added more depth and appeal to the characters. Their development becomes dependent on what they reveal about each other under the game's influence, which does add a little more dramatic interest to the movie than one usually finds in such imperiled-friends-in-a-remote-location flicks, whose victims-to-be often seem to have no histories or ambitions. One of the guys has workplace envy of the other, a fatal accident looms large in the proceedings and—well, it probably won't be a surprise that latent desires for threesomes and lesbian action figure prominently, though aside from that shower scene, BLACK WATERS' sexual content is largely a tease.

Director Gabriel Bologna (the son of actors Joseph Bologna and Renée Taylor), working from a script he wrote with Sean Clark and Michael Berenson, plays out the emotional and physical confrontations confidently enough, though the pacing (even with those temporal jumps) could've been tightened and some of the dialogue is too on-the-nose. And once potential motivations for murder have been established, the movie settles into a familiar scenario of half the characters sporting black possessed contact lenses and sequentially dispatching the other half. While the blood flows copiously (two people are taken out with a chainsaw), BLACK WATERS is never really scary, and everyone on screen is so defined by their neuroses and flaws that it's hard to work up much sympathy for them. By default, the most engaging character is screwup Rick, and the eventual revelation about what really happened to him back in the day provides the film's biggest surprise. He also figures in the final kicker, which is not the cheat it might have come off as but coulda had more impact if what came before was more compelling.

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