

'X' pays homage to horror classics

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time: 105 minutes

This film from A24 opens exclusively at theaters on March 28

Independent filmmaker Ti West has built up a notable series of cult titles over the years, including “The House of the Devil,” “The Innkeepers” and “Sacrament.” His features are notable for emphasizing mood and atmosphere, with the camera often holding stationary on subjects for extended periods of time (which has resulted in some pacing criticisms from genre critics).

“X” is the latest from the writer/producer/director, which is his first horror picture in nearly a decade. This reviewer can report that it was worth the wait. Creepy movie enthusiasts who can get on West’s wavelength will find that this effort is as effective and as memorable as his most popular titles.

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Set in 1979, the story follows a youthful, independent Texan film crew setting out to shoot a pornographic film. The group includes producer Wayne (Martin Henderson), starlet Bobby-Lynn (Brittany Snow), aspiring adult film actress Maxine (Mia Goth), male performer Jackson (Kid Cudi), director RJ (Owen Campbell) and his girlfriend/boom operator Lorraine (Jenna Ortega).

They arrive at a secluded ranch house and quickly discover that Wayne has not informed elderly property owners Howard (Stephen Ure) and Pearl (who is played by one of the previously mentioned cast members under extensive make-up) about their plans. They all decide to make the film quickly without being caught, but find the oddly behaved owners becoming a more and more threatening presence by the minute.

Visually, it's very clear from the outset that this feature is a homage to Tobe Hooper titles like "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre" and "Eaten Alive."

The production design, costuming and cinematography do an excellent job of recreating the era. At times, it all certainly feels like a lost feature from the 1970s. The only giveaways are some impressive overhead shots that wouldn't have been possible to capture during the earlier era.

Once again, the filmmaker's camera lingers on environments and effectively creates a tense mood as Howard, Pearl and the local wildlife slowly approach many of the leads from behind.

Since this is a feature about making a movie, a great deal of dark humor is derived from some of the absurdities involved in creating an adult film, including the casual attitudes of the performers about their work. One amusing moment involves the director attempting to convince himself and others that he is creating a highbrow, quality X-rated feature.

And Jackson makes an entertaining impression as the male lead of the adult production, a man who has no problem casually wandering around buck naked. Early on, much of it is played for laughs in a tongue-in-cheek manner, but there is some interesting tension and jealousy that arises within the group as shooting progresses.

Even Howard and Pearl get an unusual backstory to build some empathy and help viewers

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understand their behavior and frustration.

Enough is done in the first half of the story to make all of the characters distinctive and the cast are uniformly solid. So, when things do go haywire, viewers are invested in the disturbing goods.

Despite it being a homage of sorts to some very familiar modern horror classics, there are plenty of unique, memorable and extremely up-close-and-personal interactions towards the finale that are tense, horrific and grimly amusing (sometimes all at the same time). In fact, there is a distinct possibility that some of the big and elaborate confrontations featured in the flick have been handled in an entirely new and distinctive way.

“X” isn’t an overly deep or intellectual horror picture, but it is a very effective one that aims to thrill, chill and provide knowingly humorous winks to the audience. It generally hits the mark on all counts. At the press screening I attended, there was a consistent combination of laughs, guffaws and shrieks as all of the strangeness unfolded.

In the end, this slasher will leave a distinctive mark on viewers.

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