

'Vengeance' is a positive change for Blumhouse Productions

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

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 107 minutes

Focus Features will release this film in theaters on July 29.

Jason Blum is a producer most famous for his low-budget horror efforts, including the "Paranormal Activity," "Insidious" and "Purge" movie franchises. So, when a film called "Vengeance" appears at cinemas with Blum's name on it, one might assume that they will be seeing a genre flick in a similar mold. But that isn't the case here.

Director/writer and star B.J. Novak (who will be most familiar to viewers from the TV-series "The Office") has created something quite different. The story does revolve around a mysterious death, but it isn't focused on a maniacal killer. Instead, it's a grim fish-out-of-water comedy/drama that works far more effectively than one might anticipate.

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Ben Manalowitz (Novak) is a shallow New York-based journalist. Out of the blue, he receives a strange call from Texas. The heartbroken voice on the phone announces himself as Ty Shaw (Boyd Holbrook) and explains that his sister Abilene Shaw (Lio Tipton) has died of an opiate overdose. The protagonist is confused by the news, having no idea who the deceased is.

However, he soon realizes Abilene was a woman with whom he had a brief fling and that the family believe their relationship was serious. He ends up being roped into visiting her West Texas hometown to attend her funeral. While there, Ty appears and explains that his sister's death was actually but an act of murder... one that the pair should avenge.

A shocked Manalowitz doesn't want to get involved, but sees an opportunity. He sets out to do a big story on the odd family and their refusal to accept reality. But as his investigation progresses, he finds himself growing close to them and wondering if their claims are true.

It would be easy for the screenplay to simply focus on making fun of the Shaw family and their eccentricities. Thankfully, it also highlights Manalowitz's general ignorance of the area being visited and examines his manipulation of those around him in order to create a story. Novak's character is a challenging one to portray and the actor deserves credit for his work in the film.

Manalowitz isn't especially likable on paper, which could easily have turned viewers away. But, using humor in the first act to place the arrogant and patronizing lead in uncomfortable situations works to the movie's benefit. There are some darkly funny moments early on, including the lead being asked to give a eulogy at Abilene's funeral and plenty of awkward exchanges with Ty in which his ideas are challenged.

While there are gags throughout, the story does slowly shift gears to focus on the mystery itself and Manalowitz developing true affection for his surroundings. This includes a change in attitude and passion to discover the truth for the sake of the Shaw family. Surprisingly, the subtle change is a smooth one and ends up creating plenty of engaging drama.

Of course, the supporting cast are also essential to the movie's success. They are uniformly excellent as they turn from quirky to pensive and share personal memories of Abilene.

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There's also an unexpectedly effective supporting turn from Ashton Kutcher as local record producer Quentin Sellers. The performer doesn't have a ton of screen time, but stands out as he details his work attempting to inspire hopeful local talent in the middle of nowhere.

Additionally, the well-written screenplay deserves a nod for critiquing all of its characters and showing everyone as flawed. Things get very messy in this movie when what really occurred to Abilene is finally brought to light and the finale is appropriately tangled.

"Vengeance" was not what this reviewer expected when he walked into the theater, especially given the producer behind it. But this reaction should actually be taken as a compliment. B.J. Novak has conjured a unique little film that successfully mixes contrasting elements with sharp writing and strong performances. This is a memorable effort that makes an impression and ultimately stays with you after the credits roll.

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