

'Split' delivers shocks, surprises to recommend

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<<< *out of 4 stars*

Running Time: 117 min.

In case you haven't been on the internet or been reading film reviews in the past 10 years, director M. Night Shyamalan has become something of a polarizing figure. His first group of projects drew raves, but some audiences have since turned on the filmmaker. Personally, I feel like he's taken far too much heat over the years. Like any director, he's had a few big misfires, but has begun to find his footing recently in some smaller projects.

His latest is another little film that falls into the latter category. *Split* is a creepy thriller about a troubled man named Kevin (James McAvoy) who suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder. Specifically, he's got 24 personalities; and a couple of them are very unhappy. This leads Kevin to kidnap three teenage girls named Casey (Anya Taylor-Joy), Claire (Haley Lu Richardson) and Marcia (Jessica Sula). He locks them away in a secure location, where he preps them for some sort of feast. As he gets ready for a mysterious event, Kevin also must avert the suspicions of his therapist, Dr. Fletcher (Betty Buckley).

Unfortunately, one can't go into story details without giving too much away. Suffice to say that the movie is primarily a character piece. Of course, one certainly sympathizes with the hostages, but it's really McAvoy's movie. He is consistently an engaging and compelling antagonist. It's a role that requires the actor to veer from one personality to another. This could all end up a jumble, but the various egos are all clearly defined. They're memorably eccentric, sinister, darkly humorous and even, on occasion, sympathetic.

This performance is captured in a variety of very tight close-ups. Without the strong central

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performance, everything about this tale would fall apart. Shyamalan also uses lengthier takes that help emphasize the suspense and sensation that one of Kevin's more sinister personalities is moments away from springing up and taking action. Late in the film, the director uses the camera creatively to pan between mirrors as the many personalities speak to each other.

There are some odd elements. The third act does feel a bit over-extended and will leave many wondering where the story is actually going. It's all probably a little too long for its own good. And it comes with the territory that most viewers will be looking for a big twist at the close. As more was revealed about Kevin and Casey, this reviewer found himself constantly thinking about what might really be going on. Kevin's manic, exaggerated behavior and his claims of the coming of a "beast" as well as his "horde" of personalities certainly raises dozens of potential solutions.

When all is revealed, the initial feeling was one of slight disappointment. I was ready to walk out of the theater and write about the movie being a well-acted and intriguing effort that does its job efficiently, but lacks the big sting of some of the filmmaker's best titles. Then, shortly after the credits begin, something startling *does* occur. Don't walk out right away, because an unexpected revelation comes along that resolves many hanging issues. Frankly, it completely fooled me. In fact, it was so unexpected that it left many around with jaws agape. If you're a fan of the director's work, you'll want to see the movie quickly before spoilers are spread about it.

In the end, I have to give *Split* its props. While the movie certainly has some issues, the lead performance is well above-average and Shyamalan still possesses the skills of misdirection to deliver an enormous surprise at the close. In fact, it's an image that left me hoping for some sort of follow-up. For a small, character based genre movie, that's a pretty impressive feat.

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