

Edinburgh International Film Festival – Opening Night film Killer Joe



by Ryan McNeely

Killer Joe

Sleazy, in the best way.

Chris Smith has a problem. Owing more than he can afford to a local loan shark, the only alternative to a duct tape grave is to have his dear old mother bumped off for her life insurance. Roping his dad and step-mother into the plan, they recruit “Killer” Joe Cooper – a local police detective who does some freelancing on the opposite side of the law – to do the deed. Unfortunately for Chris, since he can’t pay up front, Joe decides to take his sister Dottie as collateral. Wacky hijinks ensue.

After 2006’s *Bug*, *Killer Joe* is William Friedkin’s second collaboration with screenwriter Tracy Letts, again working from one of Letts’ own plays. The story of Chris Smith and the increasingly deep pile of trouble he finds himself in plays out like an episode of *Jerry Springer* taken to its absurdist extreme; a white trash noir epic with laser-tight focus. Friedkin’s films have often dealt with the criminal, amoral or sexually deviant, and all three collide here in fine style. As well as being utterly filthy though, *Killer Joe* remains blackly comic throughout; it is one of Friedkin’s funniest pictures in fact. There is a distinct *schadenfreude* to be had as we watch Chris fall ever deeper into the hole he has dug for himself.

The five-man band Friedkin has assembled for his main cast are all fantastic. Emile Hirsch plays Chris as a tightly-wound ball of nervous energy and desperation, with an undercurrent of something even more unsavoury. He needs the insurance payout to keep himself alive but hates what Joe demands in payment. Thomas Haden Church and Gina Gershon are both excellent as his man-child father and aging (but slutty) step-

mother, Ansel and Sharla. The movie belongs, however, to Juno Temple as Dottie and Matthew McConaughey as Joe. 22-year-old Temple has been building up a career as a bit of indie darling over the last few years, working with such directors as Noah Baumbach and Gregg Araki, and is due to pop up in next month's *The Dark Knight Rises*, but it is going to be hard for her to top this performance in the years to come. In her hands, Dottie is a complete enigma who teaches herself kung fu from Bruce Lee movies and dances by herself in the street. We're never told how old she is, but it could be anything from mid-teens to early 20s. What we are told – via a throwaway exchange right at the start of the movie – is that she has a propensity for sleepwalking; a fact that in hindsight makes you doubt the intent behind every word she says. As for McConaughey, this is the role of his career. His Joe is like a great white shark: relentless forward motion behind deep, dead eyes. If you only know him from such lightweight fare as *Failure To Launch*, you'll be surprised at how unnerving and scary he can be.

The film was shot by legendary cinematographer Caleb Deschanel who does some amazing things with the limited light in the Smiths' trailer-park home, making the same small space alternate between dingy yet welcoming or unsettlingly claustrophobic, often within the same scene. Whether it's in the trailer park, or a freeway overpass, or an ancient wood-frame roller coaster, he and Friedkin have created a vision of Dallas that is a million miles away from the Ewings of twenty years ago. Even as heightened as it is, this is probably closer to the real thing though.

Time for a brief disclaimer: this is not a film for the faint of heart. It has been rated 18 for its sexual content and violence, including a memorable introduction to Sharla and a particularly brutal beating suffered by Chris, and the climactic dinner sequence is one for the ages. If you can get over any residual Puritanism in your psyche however, consider this highly recommended. Friedkin's twisted and twisty family sitcom with a killer ending is unlike anything I've seen in quite a while. This is two hours of good, dirty, sleazy, grimy, sweary fun. Killer Joe has its gala UK premiere on the opening night of the Edinburgh Film Festival tomorrow night (there are still some tickets available at the time of writing

– you can get them from the Filmhouse or at www.edfilmfest.org.uk), followed by a general release on 29th June.

Ryan writes for [his own film review site here](#) where you can see a photo of him with William Friedkin..!

