

Gateway Cinephiles

Appreciation and Criticism of Cinema Through Heartland Eyes

StLIFF 2011: Pig

2011 (USA)

Director: Henry Barrial

Viewed: November 13, 2011

Format: Theatrical HDCAM (Landmark Tivoli Theater)



The intrinsic grittiness of low-budget independent film-making ultimately contributes to the uncanny mood of the conceptually ambitious thriller *Pig*. Writer-director Henry Barrial's script lays out a scenario with echoes of other noir-tinted puzzle-box films such as *The Game*, *Oldboy*, and *Memento*. However, in its cinematic execution, the story discovers a disorienting, dream-like aura that places it in the hinterlands of David Lynch country. A Man (Rudolph Martin) awakens hooded and bound in the desert with no memory of his identity. He carries only a scrap of paper scrawled with a name: "Manny Elder." After collapsing from exhaustion, he finds himself in the care of a beautiful widow, Isabel (Heather Ankeny), who entices him to stay with her and her young son at their remote desert home. However, the confounding visions that flash through the Man's mind compel him to search for his identity, leading him into Los Angeles and through a succession of strange encounters. By the end of the first act, the story has undergone a drastic realignment that deepens the narrative mystery even as it narrows the film's potential. From that moment on, it's apparent that *Pig's* story must necessarily rest on a dream, a science-fiction conceit, or a malevolent conspiracy of epic proportions. (Or all three).

There's a streak of faintly dissatisfying conservatism to *Pig's* final scenes, but it has less to do with the film's message or style than with the inherent limitations of genre storytelling. No explanation that the film might offer for its strange events could realistically maintain the narrative's internal integrity and also preserve the unsettling mood that pervades the bulk of its scenes. A splendidly crafted but radically different style is on display in a particular film-within-the-film sequence, suggesting that the atmosphere that pervades *Pig* elsewhere represents an adroit utilization of the baseline indie aesthetic. The Los Angeles of the film is kin to the weird, diabolical metropolis of Lynch's doppelganger triptych (*Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, and *INLAND EMPIRE*). It's a sunny-yet-ominous place full of offhandedly eccentric moments, vaguely sinister spaces, and banal and often anachronistic objects that seem to roil with significance. In the final analysis, the film is more invested in presenting a story that glistens with philosophical relevance for our current age than in exploiting the horrifying potential of its disorienting atmospherics. Still, while it lasts, *Pig* is disarming stuff, the kind of sly little genre experiment that reveals the parched cinematic imagination that characterizes most studio thrillers.