

DVD Review: 'Red White & Blue' Plays on the Mind, Not the Gag Reflex

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CHICAGO – There are few modern horror films that possess the power to shock an audience into a state of dazed, mouth-gaping awe. Audiences of increasingly young ages are well-accustomed to copious amounts of blood and gore. The excess of violence quickly and irrevocably numbs the senses. That may be why Simon Rumley's "Red White & Blue" works so well. It plays on the mind rather than the gag reflex.

After his gritty, intimate "youth culture trilogy," Rumley took a sharp turn into the horror genre without sacrificing his character-driven narratives and meticulous attention to dramatic nuances. "Red White & Blue" explores many of the same themes explored in Rumley's earlier work—mental instability, fear of disease, vengeance. For its first half, the film shows no signs of the horrors to follow. It merely plays like an brooding drama, following various wounded souls linked by their desire to inflict pain on the world that has failed them.



DVD Rating: **3.5/5.0**

The film is divided into three parts, each centering on a character who is simultaneously a victim and a predator. Erica (Amanda Fuller) is a nymphomaniac with deep emotional scars. She spends her aimless days seducing men into bed before promptly disappearing from their lives. Her behavior is not far removed from that of a prostitute, but Erica is not motivated by money. She sleeps with guys whom she doesn't respect, which may explain why she refuses to bed Nate (Noah Taylor), an Iraq war vet whose gaunt face and wide, haunted eyes have a knack for conveying the unspeakable. There's something creepy about Nate right from the get-go, but Erica gradually befriends him, attracted to his shy yet protective demeanor.

Fuller is very touching in these scenes, nailing the desperation and repressed yearning of a woman inching toward what may be the first meaningful connection in her life. The actress is so magnetic that the film suffers whenever she's offscreen. About a third of the way through "Blue," a funny thing happens. Rumley jarringly cuts to a subplot that initially appears to be disconnected from the central action. As Nate and Erica's relationship is on the brink of blossoming, the picture suddenly abandons the couple in favor of following Franki (Marc Senter), a young man who previously "shared" Erica with a couple of his band mates. His future is looking bright, until he receives a devastating bit of news that sets off the dominoes of destruction.



Amanda Fuller and Noah Taylor star in Simon Rumley's Red White and Blue.

Photo credit: IFC Films

There are times when the film's suspense borders on aggravation, as Rumley (along with his expert editor Robert Hall) insists on beating around the bush, teasing the audience with plot details without revealing how they connect. Fragments of scenes will be left conspicuously missing, leaving a blank space in the story that won't be filled in until later. Yet the film does manage to pay off dramatically in its final act, which contains some of the most galvanizing acts of violence in recent cinematic memory. Though Fuller certainly deserves the bulk of the film's acting honors, the performance guaranteed to remain etched in the imaginations of moviegoers, particularly as they head off to bed, will be that of Taylor, in what is obviously a showcase role. Taylor is a wonderful character actor, and his work here is fittingly fierce and horrific, but the character never quite rises above the level of a two-dimensional sketch. At least Erica and Franki have the complexity necessary to make their suffering resonate on a human level. All quibbles aside, Rumley has clearly succeeded in delivering a sucker punch to the senses that's guaranteed to leave horror fans and film buffs hungry for more.



"Red White & Blue" is presented in its 2.35:1 aspect ratio, and includes first-rate commentary from Rumley and producer Bob Portal. They reveal why a great many Austin locales get face time in the film. The rapturous response that greeted Rumley's 2006 thriller "The Living and the Dead" at Fantastic Fest certainly played a considerable role in furthering the filmmaker's interest in the town. Rumley recalls how the story was partly inspired by a real life case in which a Japanese woman used her body as a weapon. In early drafts of the script, Nate was to have escaped from an asylum (a la "Halloween"), but it was decided that his character should be a discharged vet from Iraq, thus allowing the sociopathic nature of war to wash ashore. The director is up front about modeling his film after the work of Larry Clark and Wes Craven, which is an apt comparison, especially if he's referring to the Craven of the '70s and mid-'80s. Some of the most memorable insights take place during the controversial home invasion sequence, which Taylor was hesitant to film, particularly since he had recently become a father. The scene involves a child actor, Saxon Sharbino, who Rumley insists was not psychologically damaged by the ordeal. In fact, it turns out that Sharbino is already quite the tough cookie—she recently played another sobbing victim in the botched remake of "I Spit on Your Grave."

The disc also includes a 16-minute making-of featurette in which Rumley insists that the film is essentially a love story. There's a funny outtake where Taylor angrily pounces on Senter and then politely asks if he's okay. Sweltering 110 degree temperatures on the Austin locations caused the cameras to repeatedly shut down. Though I assume the filmmakers want to preserve the film's mystery, I would've been curious to see an effects breakdown detailing the makeup witnessed in nauseating close-up during the climactic scene. Rounding out the extras are no less than six trailers, two brief deleted scenes and a blooper reel that delivers a welcome burst of catharsis after such a nightmarish experience.

'Red White & Blue' is released by IFC Films and stars Noah Taylor, Amanda Fuller, Marc Senter, Nick Ashy Holden, Patrick Crovo, Jon Michael Davis and Sally Jackson. It was written and directed by Simon Rumley. It was released on May 17, 2011. It is not rated.

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