

Blu-ray Review: Scathing ‘Dark Horse’ Flips Apatowian Formula on its Head

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on December 3, 2012 - 9:43am

- [Blu-ray Review](#) [2]
- [Brainstorm Media](#) [3]
- [Christopher Walken](#) [4]
- [Dark Horse](#) [5]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [6]
- [Jordan Gelber](#) [7]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [8]
- [Mia Farrow](#) [9]
- [Selma Blair](#) [10]
- [Todd Solondz](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – Movie theaters have rarely appeared as depressingly airless as they do in Todd Solondz’s “Dark Horse.” Rather than confront his adult responsibilities, pathological man-child Abe (Jordan Gelber) storms into the nearest multiplex for his daily consumption of media-fed inspirational escapism. He quietly mouths the answers to pre-movie questions projected in the otherwise vacant theater, as his words fall on nonexistent ears.

For financially strapped young adults forced to live at home well past their teenage years, Solondz’s latest scathing satire may be a horrifying externalization of their worst nightmares. As a cautionary tale, it is both pitilessly bleak and oddly humanistic. Gelber, an actor best known for starring in the Broadway smash, “Avenue Q,” is so inherently likable that he causes the audience to root for his unfortunate character—not to fulfill his undeserved dreams, but to come to his senses.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

For roughly the film’s first two acts, “Dark Horse” is as funny and provocative as anything Solondz has ever done. Abe is an unfortunate antihero who has bought into the American myth that the underdog is always rewarded. He’s wasted his life waiting for victory to be achieved without putting forth any effort to actually achieve it. He blasts hideous upbeat pop tunes in his car (most memorably, Michael Kisur’s “Who You Wanna Be”) as if to drown out the increasingly harsh noise of reality. At age 35, Abe still lives at home with his parents: a tireless enabler of a mother (Mia Farrow) and a father (Christopher Walken) whose face is frozen in a state of catatonic disappointment. Walken earns many of the film’s biggest laughs simply by staring into space with Grant Wood-like resignation. Though Abe has acquired a desk job at his father’s office, he has no desire to understand his assigned tasks. He desperately yearns for his father’s approval, but can’t bring himself to tackle his daily paperwork, which is completed by a dutiful co-worker, Marie (Donna Murphy). As Abe’s delusions start overpowering his psyche, they overtake the narrative as well, leading to a final half-hour that becomes more unsatisfying and opaque with each successive scene. Since Marie is viewed largely through Abe’s skewered eyes, her actual motivations remain ambiguous until the film’s last few minutes, which are well-meaning but feel entirely unearned.



Dark Horse was released on Blu-ray and DVD on November 13th, 2012.

Photo credit: Brainstorm Media

The picture doesn't quite gel, but it consists of so many intriguing pieces that they demand to be seen regardless. Occupying Solondz's fractured wonderland are familiar faces such as Miranda (Selma Blair), the failed writer in "Storytelling," who accepts Abe's proposal not out of love or enchantment but simply because she's out of options. Her drug-addled phone conversations, consisting primarily of sustained awkward pauses, are small masterworks of comic timing. Also welcome is Jiminy, the ex-Sunshine family member from Solondz's excellent 2004 effort, "Palindromes," who materializes here as an obscenely chipper store clerk who is all-too-happy to inform Abe that he's of no help whatsoever. While Judd Apatow kickstarted the trend of endearing audiences to developmentally arrested men, "Dark Horse" turns the formula on its head by regarding a self-loathing screw-up who has no Hollywood ending in sight. The scenes between Abe and his parents are so brilliantly acted and written that one wishes that Solondz hadn't allowed the plot to devolve into a Buñuelian riddle. And yet, perhaps it's only fitting for Solondz to refuse fulfilling audience expectations, since his film is a seriocomic ode to unfulfilled potential.

"Dark Horse" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.77:1 aspect ratio) and sadly includes no extras. Audiences baffled or repelled by Solondz's work may be inspired to take a deeper look at it after observing the director in interviews (there are several stellar videos available on YouTube). He is charming, witty and wholly sincere.

'Dark Horse' is released by Brainstorm Media and stars Jordan Gelber, Selma Blair, Donna Murphy, Mia Farrow, Christopher Walken, Justin Bartha, Aasif Mandvi, Tyler Maynard and Zachary Booth. It was written and directed by Todd Solondz. It was released on November 13th, 2012. It is not rated.



[13]

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