

## Michael Shannon Mesmerizes in Moody ‘Take Shelter’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – It starts with a clap of thunder. Fierce winds cause the once serene landscape to shiver with unease. When the rain comes, it's the color of motor oil. All it takes is a single glance at the looming gray clouds overhead to realize that the impending storm could be capable of anything. It's enough to rock a level-headed man to his very foundation.

These are the visions that have begun to plague Curtis, the weary-eyed protagonist of Jeff Nichols' second feature effort, "Take Shelter." Festival buzz has been swarming around this picture like a flock of agitated birds, and expectations of art house buffs are generally through the roof, thanks to a trailer from Sony Pictures Classics that is easily one of the most enticing (and least spoiler-leaden) of the year.

Does the film live up to all the hype? The simple answer would be yes...and no. There are large sections of the picture that are as riveting as anything in American theaters this year. The tension level is excruciatingly intense at times, but for all his masterly direction of individual set-pieces, Nichols seems to have a nagging uncertainty about his promising concept. What starts out as a provocative psychological portrait starts to feel like a gimmicky thriller during its final moments, yet what ultimately holds the film together is the mesmerizing, Oscar-caliber work of leading man Michael Shannon, who has routinely proven to be one of the most transfixing actors in modern cinema. He looks like a Norman Rockwell painting as re-envisioned by Charles Addams. There's a darkness in his eyes that hint at unspeakable demons lurking beneath his boyish features. His galvanizing portrayal of an embittered brother in Nichols' 2007 revenge drama, "Shotgun Stories," jettisoned the undervalued character actor into cult star status. Though he's delivered fine work on both the small screen ("Boardwalk Empire") and the big screen since then, his performance in "Take Shelter" is his best to date.



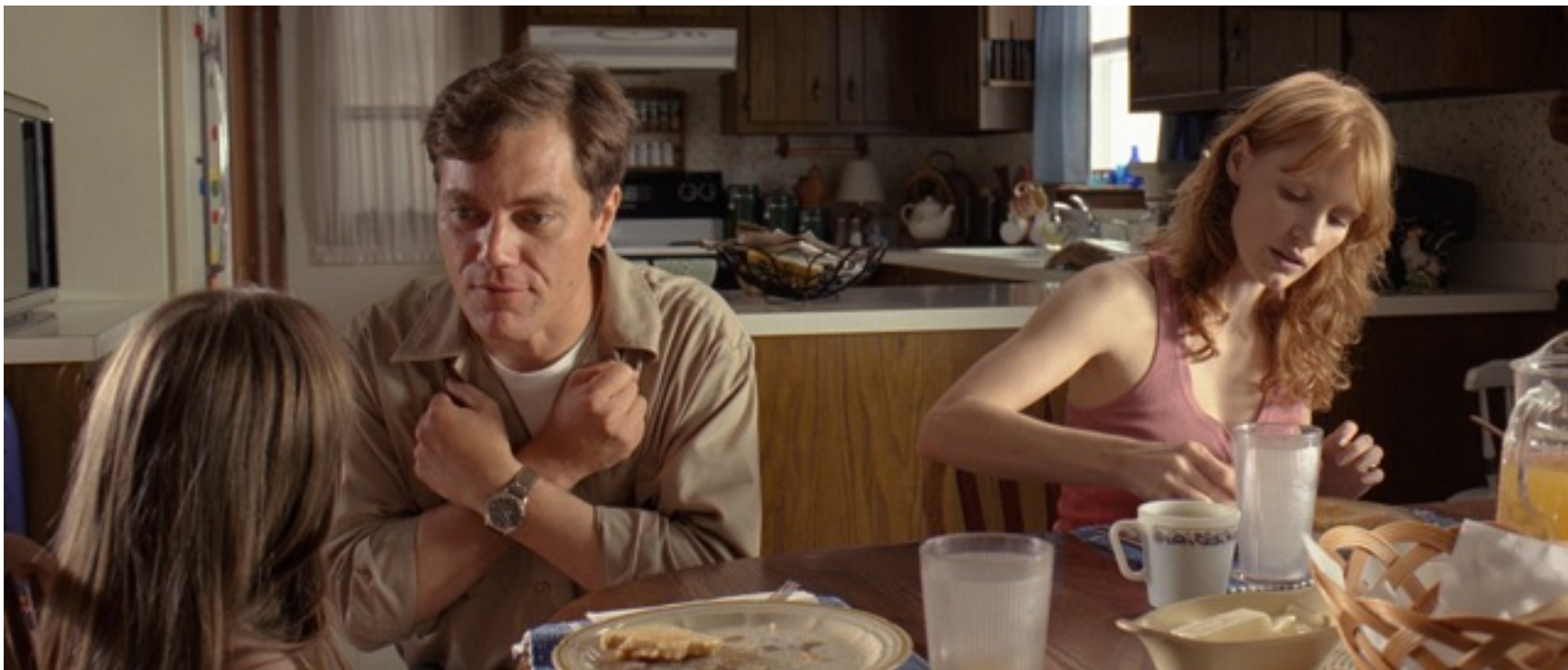
Michael Shannon stars in Jeff Nichols' Take Shelter.

*Photo credit: Scott Gardner, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics*

It's exciting to watch an actor as adept at scenery-chewing as Shannon resist any opportunity to break out in bug-eyed hysteria, save for one shattering breakdown late in the picture. He plays an Ohio family man struggling to support his stay-at-home wife, Samantha (Jessica Chastain), and six-year-old daughter Hannah (Tova Stewart), who's in need of a cochlear implant. It's clear that Curtis' life is no cake walk, but the stability of his family is greatly admired by friends such as Dewart (Shea Whigham), who works with Curtis at a sand mining company. Like Shannon, Whigham has one of those faces that perpetually looks like it's up to no good, though the primary emotion conveyed by Dewart is one of concern rather than malice.

Throughout the film's first act, Curtis has a series of nightmares so potent and vivid that they start to impact his daily routines. The paranoia created by his imagined threats does not evaporate upon awakening. This causes him to isolate himself from various potential threats. When his dog attacks him in a dream, Curtis starts leaving him outside. And when his visions of apocalyptic storms prove to be unrelenting, he decides to build a tornado shelter. Though this set-up may suggest an art-house retread of “Final Destination,” Nichols preserves the enigmatic mystery of his plot up until the final problematic reel.

While Curtis races from lightning bolts in his dreams, he runs from an equally terrifying threat in his waking life. His parents' history of mental illness has led him to fear that the visions are signaling impending schizophrenia. Many of the film's most powerful scenes center on Curtis' attempts to come clean about his situation, as his bottled tension and possible psychosis conflict with his familial impulses. Shannon's work here is utterly wrenching and should make him a formidable contender during this year's awards season.



Tova Stewart, Michael Shannon and Jessica Chastain star in Jeff Nichols' *Take Shelter*.

*Photo credit: Grove Hill Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics*

Yet the performance that is destined to be overlooked is the one delivered by Chastain, a fine actress who has become a breakout star entirely by coincidence. After delayed release dates caused five of her pictures to be released in the same year (with only two entering the mainstream), she is one of the rare performers who's simultaneously overexposed and relatively unknown. Yet her chameleon-like versatility has made her a welcome presence in multiplexes. After embodying the ethereal maternal caregiver in Terrence Malick's “The Tree of Life” (which so far remains the best film of 2011), Chastain plays a much different mother in “Shelter.” She's a problem solver determined to keep her marriage from crumbling even under the most unthinkable of conditions. She knows that Shannon is a well-meaning soul, but his evasiveness and inexplicable actions deliver a multitude of red flags. There are echoes of Jennifer Connelly's work in “A Beautiful Mind” as Chastain exudes an inner strength that refuses to give in to Curtis' supposed delusions. If they are to have any relationship at all, it will not be a co-dependent one fraught with enabling dishonesty.

Yet Curtis insists that his visions aren't dreams so much as they are inescapable feelings. Nichols creates a consuming atmosphere of malevolence through a spare use of digital effects (supervised by Chris Wells of “Avatar”) and the ominous, hypnotic score by David Wingo (a frequent collaborator of David Gordon Green). Though the film begins with a somewhat conventional structure, as the horrors Curtis encounters are revealed to be “it's-only-a-dream” delusions, once he starts taking medication, reality and fantasy begin to blur together in ways both surrealistic and ambiguous.





Take Shelter opens at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema on Oct. 7.

Photo credit: Grove Hill Productions, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics

I'll confess that around the 100-minute mark of this two-hour suspense ride, I was prepared to hail "Take Shelter" as a near-masterpiece. Without giving away any spoilers, it must be said that the final scene does not work at all. It comes on the heels of a prolonged sequence that is unflinchingly honest, brilliantly acted and dramatically satisfying. If Nichols had chosen to end the film immediately after this sequence, he would've had a far more audacious and provocative cut. Instead, the film settles for an ending that undermines a great deal of what came before. It doesn't ruin the film, but it doesn't leave the audience with much to chew over either, except for the plethora of plot holes left in its wake. Yet despite the shortcomings of his script, it's undeniable that Nichols has a gift for bringing out the very best in Shannon. Serious cinephiles seeking out the year's greatest achievements in acting cannot afford to miss Shannon's work here. He is the film's true force of nature.

*'Take Shelter' stars Michael Shannon, Jessica Chastain, Shea Whigham, Tova Stewart, Katy Mixon, Lisa Gay Hamilton and Kathy Baker. It was written and directed by Jeff Nichols. It opened Oct. 7 at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema. It is rated R.*



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