

Amy Seimetz Offers Startling Debut in ‘Sun Don’t Shine’

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Every once in awhile, a year feels like it just belongs to a certain actor or actress. 2011 was the year of Jessica Chastain. It looks like 2013 could be the year of Amy Seimetz. She’s starring in the now-playing (and brilliant) “Upstream Color,” will appear on HBO’s “Family Tree” and AMC’s “The Killing” in the next few months, stars in the indie “Be Good” and acclaimed horror film “You’re Next,” and, this week, her directorial debut, “Sun Don’t Shine,” lands on VOD and in NY theaters before an expansion later this year. Like seemingly everything that Seimetz touches lately, it’s great. Confident, stylish, and with a remarkable sense of place, “Sun Don’t Shine” truly works.

“Sun Don’t Shine” opens with a fight. Crystal (Kate Lyn Sheil) and Leo (Kentucker Audley) are clearly under an immense amount of stress and not handling it well. As they argue over who started the fight and how intense it got, it becomes clear that Seimetz is jumping into her story in a unique place. Whatever sent these two on their combative road trip would typically be the first-act centerpiece of a drama but Seimetz cracks her narrative slowly, revealing the dark past and reason for the trip of her two characters one gruesome piece at a time. We see the fight, a tense roadside encounter, a gun in the glove compartment and something worse in the trunk. The dialogue is cryptic — “*We can’t go to a motel. We got too much to do. We got to get to Terry’s bar by sunset.*” — but indicative of past problems being fled and the likelihood of more problems in the future.



Sun Don’t Shine

Photo credit: Sun Don’t Shine

Crystal and Leo are likely to bring back echoes of Sissy Spacek and Martin Sheen in Terrence Malick’s “Badlands.” He is shirtless, stubbled, and looks older than his partner with the innocent face. (Seimetz also uses poetic narration and loves the natural look of her landscape in ways that echo Malick.) Leo is also clearly in charge in the relationship as Crystal is constantly trying to get his attention. After a fight, she offers they should go to a motel room to make love. After escaping a situation, she tries to go down on him. She’s more nervous about him finding sexual satisfaction with another than she is about what it is that has sent them fleeing across Florida. Leo is distant and practically dismissive of the needy Crystal. It begs the question as to why they’re together in the first place. They probably shouldn’t be but a joint secret makes a break up impossible now.

Few 2013 films will use setting as effectively as Seimetz does in “Sun Don’t Shine.” Florida is the third protagonist in the film and Seimetz, who grew up in the Sunshine State, knows how to use it. The heat, the freeways bordered by electrical wires, the flat landscape, inflatable alligators at gas stations, that damn insect sound that permeates the air — every detail of her setting seems of a piece and it’s certainly notable the way she uses sound just effectively (and one wonders if Shane Carruth, who similarly used sound for setting brilliantly in “Upstream Color” and produced this film, didn’t have some impact on the aural design). David Lowery, who edited “Upstream” and directed the Sundance award-winning and great “Ain’t Them Bodies Saints,” to be released later this year, does a great job editing here as well.



Sun Don’t Shine

Photo credit: Sun Don’t Shine

As for performance, both leads are good even if Sheil is a little off-putting at first. She can go from calm to wide-eyed, crying panic in the blink of an eye. It may seem too broad a performance but it’s consistent and so it starts to feel genuine. Crystal is unstable. And there are a lot of unstable girls who get caught up in bad situations. Audley plays Leo more distantly and quietly but is also quite effective. Both performances work.

And yet “Sun Don’t Shine” is primarily an achievement for its debut writer/director. Whereas so many filmmakers would have taken a traditional route with a relatively straightforward story, Seimetz feels like she already has a unique vision that could be an important one to the fabric of independent cinema. There are so many times in “Sun” where I just admired a shot choice (Seimetz loves the sun, which helps the feeling of menacing heat, either directly or from a low angle on one of her characters, framed by neverending blue and bright backlight) or storytelling decision. Her spare use of score, her daring narrative choices, her clear understanding of the importance of setting to a story that feels like it could only play out exactly like this in Florida. “Sun Don’t Shine” is unlikely to be the highest profile project for Amy Seimetz in her notable breakthrough year but, years from now, when she’s a highly-acclaimed writer & director as well as actress, it could be one of the most studied and remembered.

“Sun Don’t Shine” stars Kate Lyn Sheil and Kentucker Audley. It was written and directed by Amy Seimetz. It opens in New York on Friday, April 26, 2013 and is available on VOD now.



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