

## Limiting Twists in Time Travel Drama ‘Predestination’

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Rating: **3.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – “Predestination” is a time travel game of limited pieces, in which two beings are not who they seem. Twists abound in a story that gets credit for jarring narrative directions, but this adaptation of Robert A. Heinlein’s “All You Zombies” remains limited in its potential, especially as it fails to evolve past its spiritual predecessors “Source Code” and “Looper.”

The setup begins with an elusive, pulpy menace nicknamed “The Fizzle Bomber,” who has wrought explosive terrorism on America in the 1970s and 80s. Ethan Hawke plays the time-traveling temporal agent assigned to capturing the menace, who can do so by returning to different points in the past.

His assignment restarts at 1970, where he works incognito at a NYC bar, and receives his IMDb-designated name The Barkeep. While tending bar, a loner enters the urban watering hole, and Hawke’s character begins to perk up. The loner goes by the name of the Unmarried Woman (Sarah Snook, bending gender from the start) and while having an acerbic presence, is open to a muttering chat with the Barkeep. With Hawke deftly playing the dynamic of someone trying to investigate another person, while not blowing his cover, he invites the Unmarried Woman to share a story.

A film that began with ticking clock action now takes on the form of a drinking fable, where the pursuit of the Fizzle Bomber becomes but a previous idea. In “Predestination’s” confidence, this doesn’t matter - the film now becomes a full recap of the story of Jane (the adult version played by Snook as well). Jane is an orphan whose hard knock life has been written by bizarre fate, through many unusual events like astronaut training, a single true love who vanished into the night, and a shattering biological revelation. (To share what happens to Jane would be a disservice to the jarring attitude of “Predestination.”)



Sarah Snook in 'Predestination'

*Photo credit: Vertical Entertainment*

As the Unmarried Woman shares this story, the Barkeep respectfully engages the loner on its pulverizing despair, but suddenly he offers a resounding change: what if Hawke's character could help the Unmarried Woman change their past? The Barkeep takes the Unmarried Woman downstairs to the bar, and begins a time travel expedition that changes both of their lives.

A film that funhouse-mirrors identity, contorts gender, and explains itself through time travel needs an electric crux. "Predestination" has the ride-or-die performance of Snook to thank, a further introduction of her game quality after the 2014 horror film "Jessabelle." Her work here recalls what "Knowing" superfan Roger Ebert mused about Nicolas Cage: "unafraid to crawl out on a limb, saw it off and remain suspended in air." Legitimizing the story's pulpy left turns, Snook goes to all ends, expressing a human being who has become so aggressive to a world that she seems helpless to control. As "Preservation" twists and twists, her performance is an assuring home base as the story itself can't achieve a controlled chaos.



Ethan Hawke in 'Predestination'

*Photo credit: Vertical Entertainment*

As genre filmmakers, identity is certainly an issue that the directing duo may know a thing or five about, their slowly-carved niche involving

twists on sub genres with recent success. With their 2009 mainstream bid “Daybreakers” they presented the socioeconomic horrors of a world of bloodsuckers, where human blood is a vanishing natural resource (this film was released right in the middle of “Twilight” mania). Now with “Predestination,” they’re certainly following the time warps of Duncan Jones’ similar mission in “Source Code,” (which is now getting a non-Jones sequel) and honoring the match cut idea of time travel so successfully implanted by their more-immediate-parallel, director Rian Johnson and his film “Looper.” Those projects each have a success that the Spierig Brothers hope to be a part of, but they do not own these recognizable elements in the process; “Predestination” stands out most for its wackiness. The film is stubbornly a strange, secondary beast in the shadow of its more refined predecessors.

Once the Unmarried Woman’s bar story establishes itself as the film’s central flashback, the film’s aforementioned limited number of pieces begin to play against the story’s twisty nature. “Predestination” tasks itself with creating surprising explanations out of only a few, increasingly limited options. Eventually, as “Predestination” nearly twists itself to death while ironically trying to make sense, the answers become awkwardly obvious, with too many “but why?” or “ ... oh.” punctuations. Packaging its vitalizing ideas in gee-whiz surprises, “Predestination” doesn’t have the desired tension, or a sense of wonder. The film has a spoiler-heavy tale ready to be unraveled, which makes for a curious watch - but try not to get too far ahead of it.

*“Predestination” opens in limited theaters and VOD on January 9. Featuring Ethan Hawke, Sarah Snook, and Noah Taylor. Written by the Spierig Brothers, adapted from “All You Zombies” by Robert A Heinlein. Directed by the Spierig Brothers. Rated “R”*



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