

Stylish, Well Performed ‘You Were Never Really Here’

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on April 15, 2018 - 8:38am

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Actor Joaquin Phoenix almost solely specializes in portraying broken souls, but he also does it with such intensity that he adds necessary depth to those characters, to allow for their redemption. As a hit man for hire in the new film “You Were Never Really Here,” he again reaches beyond the darkness.

The film is an adaptation of a Jonathan Ames novel, and is directed by Lynne Ramsay (“We Need to Talk About Kevin”). Like “Kevin,” it is a moody interpretation of a highly salacious subject, the use of preteen girls for prostitution. Phoenix is a hardened Marine combat veteran-turned-hit-man whose only soft spot is for his aging mother. The process of the story is to get him to feel again, but it is done through many tortuous emotional encounters and his own brand of violent justice. Ramsay’s cinema landscape is a dreamy one, and protects the Phoenix character – seemingly against his will – within a cocoon of sorrow, while the rest of his life crumbles around him... it becomes an all-encompassing life lesson.

Joaquin Phoenix is Joe, an Iraq veteran whose PTSD – both in childhood and in war – makes him both suicidal and qualified for his work as a hired gun. He is super paranoid along the way, and his only emotional relief comes in caring for his dementia-addled mother (Judith Roberts) in a middle-class neighborhood in New York City.



Joe (Joaquin Phoenix) and Nina (Ekaterina Samsonov) in ‘You Were Never Really Here’

Photo credit: Amazon Studios

His next job is a doozy. A state senator (Alex Manette) named Votto is working through some family issues, which includes his runaway preteen daughter Nina (Ekaterina Samsonov). He suspects she has been forced into prostitution, and gives Joe an address to a high end brothel that caters to the specific kink of their wealthy customers. Joe is able to rescue the girl, but sets off a series of events that puts him and everyone involved around him in danger, leading all the way to powerful state leaders.

The story in "You Were Never Really Here" is one thing about the film, the other is Lynne Ramsey's highly stylized way of forging a character environment. Joe's world is underground, given his profession and clients, but the surface struggle with his mother, the disgust of the brothel and his own demons become just as important as saving the day. Much like his turn as a World War II veteran in "The Master," Joaquin Phoenix is able to embody all of Joe's past despair, and deliver it within a "weird beard" man that you'd cross the street to avoid.

"We Need to Talk about Kevin," Ramsay's previous film, took on the vicious misery of a mass school shooting, and preteen prostitution is another turn-away-from-the-screen topic. But again, Ramsey's sophisticated deliver of story and atmosphere adds even more twisted darkness to verboten situations. The brothel scenes are spookily drawn out, juxtaposing Joe's violent justice with a all-house stereo system that plays inappropriate pop songs... the audience gets lost along with Joe.



Joe Against the System 'You Were Never Really Here'

Photo credit: Amazon Studios

Another Lynne Ramsey characteristic is the breakdown of authority figures, designed to nurture society but inevitably damning it. In her human hierarchy the people at the top are ruthless and selfish, while the people like Joe, his mother and Nina become victims of their crass power. Joe's blindly raging father (the authority of his childhood), morphs to his military PTSD victim in an illegal war, which becomes a brothel for wealthy-and-powerful clientele, catering to sickest whims of a sick society. Hope becomes a narrow shaft of light that a broken Joe has to rise through.

Is it a wonder that audiences flock to escapist fare like superhero movies? But explorations like "You Were Never Really Here" can ultimately be more uplifting, because real life redemption isn't Captain America saving the day, but a lost war veteran reaching the other side of nowhere.

"You Were Never Really Here" continued its nationwide release in Chicago on April 13th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Joaquin Phoenix, Ekaterina Samsonov, Alex Mannette, Judith Roberts and Alessandro Nivola. Screenplay adapted and directed by Lynne Ramsey. Rated "R"



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