PRODUCTION
Film Discussion Group
CAST Bay Area Film Enthusiasts
LOCATION
Email:
adedic@pacbell.net
DATE Meet Monthly
Sunday evenings
TIME 6:30 pm

FILM: **NITRAM**

FDG RATING: 3.7 ☺☺☺☺◯

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Justin Kurzei: *director/writer*
Caleb Landry Jones: *actor, Martin Bryant*

DATE: May 22, 2022

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **NITRAM**

The 2021film, Nitram, by Justin Kurzel, is a character study drama based on the life and behavior of Martin Bryant who carried out a mass shooting in Port Arthur, Tasmania, Australia, on April 28, 1996, killing 35 people and wounding 23. Why make a film about a horrific tragic event? It's been 25 years but many say the event is still too painful to talk about, a wound from which Tasmania has yet to recover.

We asked that question as part of our film discussion. One discussion participant said it should not have been made, another said if she was a film maker and offered this script, she would have turned it down. The other discussion participants agreed that the film serves an educational purpose to bring attention to the behaviors that signal possible serious problems. And professionals who can help should be alerted. Being able to recognize red flags and involve the individual in counseling has the potential to prevent tragic repercussions.

The film begins with actual footage of Martin Bryant as a little boy confined to a hospital bed because of burns from a mishap with fireworks. He's asked if he has learned a lesson from the mishap and he says "Yes". Then he's asked if he will ever play with firecrackers again, and he emphatically answers, "Yes".

We next meet a 20 year old Nitram (Martin spelled backwards) played by Caleb Landry Jones, whose outstanding performance earned him a best actor award at 2021 Cannes Film Festival. His mother seems to be always watching him. He needs to be watched. She knows something isn't quite right and even took him to a psychiatrist who put him on medication. We learn that when he was a youngster, he hid in his mother's car when they were shopping, as she frantically looked for him and then when she went to her car and found him in the back seat he gleefully laughed enjoying the turmoil he caused; he got pleasure out of hurting his mother. She tries to impose some semblance of order on her son who clearly lacks empathy and is functioning at a level more like a twelve year old but with mental and social deficiencies.

We see his old class mates still taunt him, calling him by his despised nickname, Nitram. He is fixated on the surfer clique, imagining he could be a cool surfer and since his mother refuses to buy him a surf board telling him he doesn't have the ability to surf, he tries to make enough money by offering to do yard work for neighbors, which is how he meets the reclusive heiress, Helen. She agrees to have him mow her lawn and the two seem to recognize each other as kindred misfits. Helen is the first person who seems to accept him. They enjoy each other's company with Helen only gently admonishing him for his reckless behaviors. Several discussion participants recognized the relationship as almost symbiotic therapy for each of them. She buys him a surf board, and of course, in a scene of embarrassing ridicule in front of the cool surfer clique, he awkwardly fails in his attempt at catching a wave.

Not wanting to live with his parents, Nitram moves into Helen's spacious mansion after her mother dies. Helen continues to buy him whatever he wants including a car which he drives so recklessly because of his excitement, he causes an accident that kills her. Having no surviving family, she has already left her mansion and money to him. What happens when an unstable person who feels like a misfit has the money to buy anything?

The film shows us how quickly destructive behavior issues can escalate. Nitam's father is a weak man who has a dream of buying a house and turning it into a bed and breakfast but after scrimping to gather the payment needed for the loan, the agent says she has sold it to someone else. Nitram had gone with his Dad to the loan meeting so shares the devastating experience with his father. He offers a bag full of inheritance money to the elderly couple who now own the home but they refuse to sell. The factors keep adding up that will cause his violent explosion.

An especially impactful, very convincing scene was when Nitram goes to buy a gun and we witness how easy it was for him to bring a bunch of cash and get the gun. We appreciated that the film did not show the massacre but only the minutes leading up to it.

One discussion participant said it was like watching a slow-burning horror film and that rather than purely dramatizing the event, adding commentary would have redeemed the film. Others saw the scenes as a step by

step discovery, revealing the mind of a killer. We agreed that the actor was flawless. Another described the actor as relentless in his performance.

Many of us admitted the film was uncomfortable to watch because it was completely convincing. It did what it was meant to do which was to show us the signs that indicate a disturbing, harmful behavior, so that we can be more aware and take action to change the path. The film probably reached more main stream viewers as a drama rather than a documentary. Another comment was we need to understand the dark side even if uncomfortably gruesome.

Sadly, two days after our discussion, a disturbed young 18 year old bought two assault rifles and on Tuesday, May 24, 2022, Salvador Rolando Ramos fatally shot 19 4th grade students and 2 teachers and wounded 17 others at Uvalde Robb Elementary School in Texas. No one thought he was a threat although he had dropped out of school, had a falling out with his mother so went to live with his grandparents, and classmates said he showed disturbing behavior. There were earlier red flags as well.

Outstanding performances all around reenacting a tragic gun massacre that sadly is frequently being repeated in similar ways. The film clearly shows us the behavior warning signs. For this reason, it is a valuable educational dramatization that hopefully will encourage people to get help for individuals who exhibit harmful behavior tendencies.

We gave the film Nitram and very hopeful 3.7 on our scale of 1 to 5. 5 is the best.

See you at the movies!

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