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THE INDEPENDENT EYE

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Review: "Meskada," murder and manufacturing in a small town.

By Alison Willmore on 04/23/2010

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Reviewed at the 2010 Tribeca Film Festival.



Like many a film that has its premiere at Tribeca, "Meskada" is earnest and unremarkable, with a cast stacked high with semi-known actors, like Nick Stahl as small-town detective Noah Cordin, or Rachel Nichols from "Alias" as the sheriff's deputy partnered with him on a sensitive case, or some guy from "The Black Donnellys," or some guy from "Twilight," or "Boondock Saint" Norman Reedus. Its ace in the hole, in terms of publicity hooks, is that it's the film debut of Grace Gummer, daughter of Meryl Streep.

To give credit where it's due, the film, the second from writer/director Josh Sternfeld ("Winter Solstice"),

has ambitions reaching beyond being a straightforward police procedural, and they lead to glimmers of something interesting that never quite materializes. Cordin is pulled in to investigate a home robbery gone wrong that left a child dead in Hilliard, which, we're reminded several times, is a prosperous place. (One of the film's major obstacles is that Hilliard, the affluent town, and Caswell, the poor one, don't look all that different.) Facing pressure from the community and from the boy's grief-stricken mother, an influential member of the county government, Cordin follows a clue to Caswell, where he grew up, to account for the whereabouts of anyone who's had to travel toward Hilliard to find work. Given the dismal prospects in the town, that seems to be half the male population.

We know from the start who's responsible for what was an unfortunate accident -- a pair of young men (Jonathan Tucker and Kellan Lutz) scrabbling to get by until the manufacturing plant the town's been trying to lure in brings with it a few hundred much-needed jobs. The dead boy's mother takes revenge on Caswell by interfering with that deal, and soon the battle falls into the lines of "White trash!" and "Rich folks!", fought out in the unlikely arenas of county commission meetings.



These ungainly specifics might make you think "Meskada" is based on a true story -- it's not -- but everything is weirdly shorn of regional details, and it's not until we get a glimpse of an addressed envelope that we're given any clue as to what state, or, for that matter, region of the country we're in. Maybe that's deliberate, to underline the film's intentions to Say Something About America, but it just creates a "Twilight Zone"-esque gap between the realistic and generalized minutia, where every character seems to overidentify with their everytown because those towns are drifting in orbit, loosely tethered together, somewhere above the Midwest.

As for Ms. Gummer, she looks, at some angles, strikingly like her mother, but doesn't yet share her mother's comfort in front of the camera. The other performances are fine, with the MVP being Reedus, who makes a nicely slithery sleazeball.

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