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From the Editor

Well, here we go...

After spending a few months working on the updated *FanActivity Gazette*, I've been invited to work up an update on *Films Fantastic* to turn the spotlight on the latest reviews of current and past (and maybe new-to-you?) films.

George Phillies and I have talked about the schedule for this one, and the choices are monthly and bi-monthly, so let's see what you think – how often would you like to see us put this particular 'zine in your hands?

In this edition, the films reviewed are listed in alphabetical order. Please let me know if that suits. I'm looking forward to your feedback.

And with that, let's go to the movies...

~ Jason

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Contributors (alphabetically)

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Contributions welcome.

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***Argylle* Twists Up a Fun Spy Romp**

Jason P Hunt

Argylle (2024)

Screenplay by Jason Fuchs

Produced by Matthew Vaughn, Adam Bohling, Jason Fuchs, David Reid

Directed by Matthew Vaughn

PG-13, 2hr 19m

Argylle knows exactly what kind of movie it is, and it's up to the rest of us to keep up.

I think Matthew Vaughn had his tongue planted firmly in cheek throughout the bulk of production, and he delivers an energetic romp that gives us a series of twists that all take us deeper into a convoluted plot that's both clever and silly. This is a comedy, and while it takes itself as seriously as it needs to, it never takes itself *too* seriously. And that works to the better.

Elly Conway (Bryce Dallas Howard in mom jeans) is a waitress-turned-author who's just published her latest installment in a book series featuring superspy Argylle (Henry Cavill), and when confronted with the possibility that her next book doesn't quite end right, she hops on a train with her cat in tow and heads out to visit Mom June (Catherine O'Hara) for a brainstorming session. Only before she gets there, she meets scruffy-looking nerf herder Aidan (Sam Rockwell), who introduces himself as a for-real spy and proceeds to save her life from practically everyone else on the train trying to kill her.

From there, it's a roller-coaster ride of plot twists in a story that feels like James Bond got dropped into *Romancing the Stone*. Elly is repeatedly confronted with all manner of wild (and sometimes silly) scenarios where Aidan is saving her at the same time teaching her how to do espionage, revealing that through her novels she's unwittingly come close to revealing an actual rogue intelligence agency that now needs her to finish her next book so they can recover a file full of details about the conspiracy.

And through a clever bit of editing and hallucination, Elly keeps seeing Agent Argyll interchangeably with Aidan.

The action is hyper-kinetic at times, and typical of Vaughn with his *Kingsman* films aesthetic. But remember, this one's a straight-up comedy action picture, so there are some predictable story beats, but the writing is smart enough to connect the dots in a way that doesn't feel ham-fisted or overwrought. Howard gets to show off a bit of range between the start of the encounter and the end, and her chemistry with Rockwell sells the whole preposterous notion.

Bryan Cranston gets to chew the scenery, and while his performance is more Dr. Evil than Dr. No, he has a couple of choice moments. Not many, and I think his character is the weak link in the chain, if I had to quibble about anything. His turn as the villain is just a little too broad in some instances; all he needs is a moustache to twirl as he hams around the control room of his lair.

Samuel L. Jackson doesn't get very much to do, and that's disappointing. Maybe he was doing Vaughn a favor?

Rockwell really does steal a lot of the movie. He's irreverent and sarcastic one minute, all business dispatching the bad guys in the next minute. It's interesting to see him in this kind of role, too, because you don't normally see Sam Rockwell as a romantic lead type of actor. But he holds his own opposite Howard, who gives as good as she gets. The evolution of Elly from timid mouse to ... something more ... owes a lot to Howard's ability to make sure that Elly is *ignorant* of things, not *incompetent* when it comes to the actual spy stuff. The dynamic reminds me a lot of *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* or *Chuck*, wherein the "normal" person gets swept up in fantastic circumstances and is forced to swim. The script gives us plenty of references to Elly's research efforts to make sure her secret agents are plausible enough, and that research starts to come in handy as she and Aidan work to track down that secret file.

Which leads me to the fact that I keep forgetting that Bryce Dallas Howard is an actress. I have it in my head that she's a director, so I have the occasional "oh, yeah" moments when she's in front of the camera. And she looks a whole lot better as a redhead with bangs...

Upon leaving the theater, I heard that this is based on the book by Elly Conway. First: no, it's not. Not quite. There *is* a book, *Argyll: The Novel*, ostensibly by Elly Conway (and not Taylor Swift). Judging by the description of the book over on Amazon, the story in the book is *not* what you're going to see on the screen. It's almost a meta-story, and I wouldn't be surprised to find that the book was created as a marketing gimmick in the same way Marvel gave us *Look Out for the Little Guy* by Scott Lang — yes, it's a real book, but it's not a real book.

Also, this one last thing: remember, I said this was a comedy. It's *not* a parody. It's not a send-up of the usual spy tropes. It uses those tropes to sell the humor, and it works. It's a popcorn flick. Nothing more than that. Vaughn probably could have done it with a smaller budget and less CGI, but how else are you going to get a cooperative cat?





Lionsgate's *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* Review by Jim McCoy

The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes (2023)
Screenplay by Michael Lesslie and Michael Arndt
Based on the novel by Suzanne Collins
Produced by Nina Jacobson, Brad Simpson, Francis Lawrence
Directed by Francis Lawrence

(Author's note: Yes, I reviewed the book already. You can read that review [here](#).)

Yes, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* is a Lionsgate film, but Suzanne Collins is the real genius here. I have read the book twice and now seen the movie and I still can't quite wrap my mind around the fact that she managed to take a complete asshole villain (and if you never wanted to cut President Snow's heart out with a rusty spoon you've never read/seen the original *Hunger Games* trilogy.) and turn him into a protagonist that truly resonates with her audience. I won't spend too much time on that because I've done that review, but I still marvel at it. Seriously, Collins deserves some kind of major award for that.

Of course, there's plenty of action and violence. Young "Corio" is the driving force behind building the Games and continuing them into the future. There is political intrigue. There is friendship, brotherhood, and betrayal. There is an awful lot to this story and it's woven so skillfully that you almost feel like you're living in the world that Collins has created and Lionsgate has replicated.

HAVING SUMMARIZED MY LAST REVIEW...

I was immediately struck by the differences in "feel" between *Ballad* and the first four movies. *Ballad* is much grittier, much grimmer, and much darker than the others, and I mean darker in the literal

sense of how much lighting they probably had on set. My first impression when the movie came up was one word: "noir." Don't get me wrong. It was in full color, but it had that darkness to it. Even later in the movie when the sets are better lit something about the way it looks (it might be a filter. I took a class called Intro to Film, but I don't remember going over how filters work.) is just less bright and glittery.

I think that's the point though. This is not the Panem of Katniss Everdeen. Panem, in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, is a nation only ten years removed from a massive civil war that ripped the whole country apart and ended with the Capitol once again holding dominion over its vassal Districts. This is a world where things haven't been put back together yet. It's a world where the to-be-hated president is a young man from a once-great family. It's a world where The Hunger Games are nowhere near what they one day will be and it looks it.

And seriously, I want to know who designed these sets. Listen folks, I don't watch award shows. I'd rather spend my time watching movies than watching movie stars tell each other how great they are. I'd rather listen to music than watch musicians pat each other on the back. It's weird because they do deserve to be recognized for their efforts and I'm not trying to hate but it's just not my thing. That much having been said; Is there an Oscar for set design? Seriously? If there is, it should go to the people who made *Ballad*. I'm being one hundred percent sincere here. The Capitol goes from grungy to well...

Better. Not what it will be but not so war torn either. The classroom has the feeling for a Roman amphitheater. Snow's home has that "it used to be really awesome here" look that I'd never think you could replicate, but they owned it. The Peacekeeper Barracks is kind of cliché-ish, but it's the freaking military where cookie cutter is the order of the day. The bar where the Peacekeepers party feels like a massive honky-tonk of an earlier era where electricity wasn't really much of a thing. The Arena before the explosions looks very well done and exciting, complete to the turnstiles. Volumnia Gaul's office was eerie, creepy, disgusting and awesome. But it's the Arena after the explosions take place where they really shine.

It was great because there were shades of Caesar Flickerman from the original *Hunger Games* trilogy and his comment about "The use of the rubble" in one of his favorite older arenas. There was definitely rubble in the Arena in *Ballad*. There were also tunnels, an arch of sorts, some fans...

It was amazeballs.

It took what would have been a truly lackluster Arena and turned it into a nightmarish land of death. This is where the darker tone really took hold and pushed the story along all on its own. I really got the feeling that you never knew who was coming from where and how things were going to change.

And yeah, it wasn't the elaborate Arenas of the original trilogy, but it was sixty-five years earlier and that hadn't developed yet.

The music in the flick was awesome as well. Rachel Zegler has a voice that just won't quit. I've seen stage shows from the upper balcony starring actors and actresses who didn't have voices that strong. They were impressive too. She puts a ton of emotion into everything she sings, too. The definition of good art is that it creates an emotional reaction and Zegler's voice definitely does that. She wins over the Districts, then the Capitol and at some point that Jimbo guy sitting in the theater with her voice. I was in band in high school and I have a love of great show tunes. We played them and I've seen a number of musicals because of the memories they evoke. I have a sneaking suspicion that, thirty years from now, out there somewhere, a forty plus year old former band member is going to remember "The Ballad of Lucy Gray-Baird" and "Nothing You Can Take From Me" the same way I remember "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Memory". Those songs are that good.

The acting was awesome as well. Tom Blyth makes an awesome Coriolanus Snow. He makes that character live like no other could have. Rachel Zegler as Lucy Gray-Baird is amazing. She goes from scared to strong to looking toward the future in a way that few others could. Viola Davis is a perfectly creepy Dr. Gaul. She needs to be. And of course, Peter Dinklage is great in whatever he's in. That's just him.

In short, I loved every minute of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*. I'd go see it again tomorrow if I could. I can't wait till this thing comes to streaming so I can watch it another few times. I mean that. Snow always lands on top.

Bottom Line: 5.0 out of 5 Scared Tributes



We welcome your feedback!

If you have comments, suggestions, or articles to share please send an e-mail to jphunt@scifi4me.com and let us know how we're doing!

Thank you for taking the time to read and respond.





Dune (2000)

Review by Richard Paolinelli

Dune (2000)

Teleplay by John Harrison

Based on the novel by Frank Herbert

Produced by David R. Kappes

Directed by John Harrison

Not Rated, 4hr 25m

I've looked at the recent *Dune* adaptation as well as the original 1984 film. So, with the long-awaited sequel coming out I thought it was time to look at the three-part mini-series that aired on the Sci Fi Channel back in 2000.

When it was announced and finally released, I was excited. We'd finally get to see the full book get its due on the screen – albeit on the smaller television screen at home as opposed to the big screen at the theater – but this version would have much better graphics and would be able to cover the areas that the 1984 film just didn't have time to deal with. But, did the advantage of longer running time and superior special effects make this the best *Dune* adaptation? Let's see shall we.

The story

The mini-series does what the 2021 film doesn't. It introduces us to the Emperor Shaddam IV and his daughter, Princess Irulan. They are key players in Frank Herbert's original book and they get to show us why in this adaptation.

Also, unlike the 2021 film, the word "jihad" is used.

The mini-series stays true to the story. The Atredies are being uprooted from Caladan to Arrakis as part of the Emperor's plan to use the Harkonnens to remove a threat to his throne. Paul, the son of Duke Leto, finds himself caught up not only in the ages-old battle between the Houses, as well as the machinations of the Emperor, but also in the even-older plotting of the Bene Gessirit as he struggles to survive on Arrakis after the fall of House Atredies.

The characters

Paul is the main character of the book and the series and finds himself in the middle of much intrigue. He is dealing with the impending move of his entire House from Caladan, a water world, to Arrakis, which is about as bone dry as a world can get and still have life on its surface.

His mother and Bene Gessirit, the Lady Jessica, has been training him in the ways of her order. His father is Duke Leto, who knows he is stepping into a trap by taking control of Arrakis, but has plans of his own to thwart the schemes of both the Emperor and Leto's enemy, the Baron Harkonnen. The Duke, and Paul, lean heavily upon their Lieutenants, Gurney Halleck, Duncan Idaho and Thufir Hawat, as they take up residency on Arrakis.

The people who lived on Arrakis long before the Spice was discovered, are the Fremen. A band of desert people and fierce fighters that Leto hopes to recruit to his side in his battle against his foes. The leader is Stilgar, who allows Idaho to join his band. (My one complaint is they seem to have forgotten about Liet Kynes in the mini-series.)

Chani, the girl Paul has seen in his dreams, is there when Paul and Jessica flee into the desert. Feyd Rautha and Rabban, the Baron's nephews, aid their Uncle's plans, while Feyd seems to have his own ideas on what will happen on a post-Atredies Arrakis.

The world

As with the other two adaptations, the majority of the action takes place on Arrakis, with some scenes on Caladan at the beginning, and brief scenes on Giedi Prime (the Harkonnen's home world), the Imperial Palace on Kaitain, and a few scenes in space sprinkled in because this is supposed to be a space opera after all. But the sands of Arrakis, the capital city of Arrakeen, and the rocky caves where the Fremen live is where the action is and it is on full display. Sand waves working across the surface, giant sandworms slithering below. A climate so arid that special suits must be worn to remain alive out in the open. But the most important aspect of the world is the life-extending Spice Melange, the only thing that makes the planet worth fighting, and dying for.

The politics

Again, the mini-series stays in alignment with the other two adaptations. There are politics to spare in this film. The Emperor, fears the rise of House Atreides that could topple him from his throne. House Harkonnen has had a centuries-long feud with the Atreides and is more than willing to play along with the Emperor's schemes, even if it means releasing their grip on the wealthiest planet in the known universe if but temporarily, in order to do in their old enemy.

As for the Atreides, they have their own code of honor, but know how to play the political game in order to advance their position and power within the Lansraad – the collection of Houses within the Empire (think of it as an unelected Senate) – and CHOAM – The Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles – that controls economic affairs across the known universe. Toss in the long-term schemes of the Bene Gessirit – trying to create a superbeing called the Kwisatz Haderach that they can control – and the machinations of the Spacing Guild – who controls all space travel – and you wind up with everyone having their knives out for everyone else.

Content warning

There's violence; you have large-scale and small scale battles so yeah, there's violence. But aside from that, it's your basic made for TV sci-fi mini-series.

Who is it for?

Fans of sci-fi/fantasy will enjoy this adaptation. Fans of Herbert's original six books – which inspired my work in *When The Gods Fell* and the Starquest 4th Age series – will also enjoy the series, especially as it has fewer changes from Herbert's original material than the 2021 adaptation did, and explores more of the characters than the 1984 film does.

Why watch it?

The depth of the story, thanks to the fact they stretched it out to four-and-a-half hours, makes this a must watch if only to get a fuller immersion into the *Dune* universe. And the CGI is much better than the 1984 film.

I give it an 8 out of 10.

Who did it better?

There's much to like and dislike with all three adaptations. I still wish we could have had the 1984 cast with 2021's director, special effects and budget (minus the blasted gender swapped Kynes).

My biggest complaint with the 2000 mini-series was, despite having some talented actors, the characters on the screen came across as 2D to me. Almost as if they were pale shades of the people they were supposed to be. Given the talent in the cast, I almost have to lay the blame for that on the director, John Harrison.

I still have to go with the 1984 film as the overall better adaptation (so far) and the 2024 sequel is going to have to really knock my socks off to change my opinion here.





Go Play In The Sand With **DUNE: PART TWO** Mindy Hunt

Dune: Part Two (2024)

Screenplay by Denis Villaneuve and Jon Spaihts

Based on the novel by Frank Herbert

Produced by Denis Villaneuve, Mary Parent, Cale Boyter, Tanya Lapointe, and Patrick McCormick

Directed by Denis Villaneuve

Rated PG-13, 2hr 46m

Dune. What do I say? I'm not normally one to write movie reviews but in this case Mr. Boss felt I might be better at it since I've read the book more recently than he has. If I think about it, a *Dune* book review could be a movie review.... What's that say about Dennis Villeneuve's movies? They're a fairly faithful adaptation of Frank Herbert's book.

And that's not something you find very often.

Dune Part Two picks up where *Part One* left off, continuing the story of Paul Atreides (Timothée Chalamet) and his mother Jessica (Rebecca Ferguson) going with Stilgar (Javier Bardem) and his tribe, learning and living in their new life with the Fremen. They see the rift created in the natives of Arakkis: those who believe the Kwisatz Haderach will free them and those who think they are just stories, created from generations of Bene Gesserit stories. While Jessica believes in her son and quietly pushes the belief that he is the Messiah Muad'Dib, Paul does not want to acknowledge that he could be the one. He has visions showing he is, but the vision are not complete, just fragments, and not pleasant. Stilgar who is a devout believer, points out that Muad'Dib is too humble to admit it he is Muad'Dib.

We finally meet Padishah Emperor Shaddam IV (Christopher Walken), who was the mastermind behind the destruction of House Atreides. The first movie set up the rest of this story, the aftermath

of the Harkonnens regaining control of Arakkis and the response from the Fremen and the House of Atreides, including the rise of Muad'Dib. It's not pretty and the gloves come off. The Harkonnens underestimate (and under count) the Fremen, thus slowly igniting an internal implosion of House Harkonnen between the Baron and his two nephews. Finally we see Dave Bautista's Glossu "Beast" Rabban get some screen and story time (unlike in *Part One* where he was wasted) but we also finally get to see Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen. But more on him later.

And for a book that was released 59 years ago, I won't give away any spoilers. I mean movie, no spoilers...though the movie is a well done spoiler.

I'm gonna start with the movie's look. Greg Fraser's cinematography is *gorgeous*. One of the things I loved about *Part One* was how beautiful the film was. I compared the desert to the ocean; the waves, the vastness, even the foam and mist that from the movement of the spice over the dunes. When you see the sandworms come up out of the sand, it's no different than watching whales breach. The wide landscape shots are breathtaking and intoxicating.

At the same time, we consider the look of Gedi Prime. Since my mental imagery of this world is from the last couple books, Villeneuve's visual is quite different and stunning. The reverse negative of the arena fight scene for Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen's (Austin Butler) birthday matches the horrific life the Baron (Stellan Skarsgård) lives in while oddly making it beautiful.

Since the movie sticks closely to the book, it's good to see the actors have a better chance to really dive into their characters. At first I wasn't completely sold on Zendaya as Chani, but after her performance in this movie, I'm OK with it. I'm still a fan of Chalamet and Ferguson. I think Josh Brolin is better casting for Gurney Halleck than Patrick Stewart in the David Lynch version of *Dune*. Patrick Stewart is soft enough for Gurney's singing and humor, but he's not quite built like a soldier. He doesn't show the wear and tear of war like Brolin does. But even with Brolin's hardness, he's able to also portray the love and dedication Gurney has for the Atreides (including his silent acceptance of Chani) and some vulnerability (not much) that helps lead to the Fremen's acceptance of him into their fold.

Again, Stellan Skarsgård delivers a great performance as the Baron. I like that we're able to see more of the Baron's morbid physique, unable to move himself. I do like Florence Pugh, but I don't think I'd have cast her in the role of the emperor's daughter. Herbert described Irulan as "a tall blonde woman, green-eyed, a face of patrician beauty, classic in its hauteur, untouched by tears, completely undefeated...Princess Royal, Bene Gesserit-trained" (pg 474). She does a good enough job but shows too much emotion and does not hold herself as well as Lady Jessica in the ways of the Bene Gesserit. I also don't know who should have played her.

Christopher Walken is Christopher Walken. I think he did a fine job. The one actor in character that really stood out was Austin Butler as Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen. He captured the psychopathic creep of the character. Books allow you inside a character's head and I wish we could hear his internal dialog because not only is he sick, he's smart. Very smart. In the book, he can hold his own scheming against the Baron. Their interactions to out wit are disgustingly fun.

I point out again that the movie is faithful to the book but at the end I did feel something was missing. I was second guessing myself knowing that Villeneuve is planning on a third movie possibly combining *Dune Messiah* and *Children of Dune*. I figured that whatever I felt was missing was probably in the next book (I read them back to back to back). When looking for the description of Irulan, I reread the end and found I was right.

I don't want to give away spoilers but will say this. First, a character is missing. Kinda. They weren't portrayed as the book intended but done well enough I felt Villaneuve's method was OK. Second and third go hand and hand. There was a certain conversation I was waiting to hear that never happened. And I'm OK with this because not everything will make it into the final cut. However, even if Villaneuve tried putting it in, it never could have happened with the way movie ended, which in my opinion was a cop out. They alluded to the relationship between Paul and Chani and that he would love her till the end, but neither film gives us the full history of their time together and why this was important for him to say and for her to know. Yes, we see at the end how heavy the political game is about to get, but what does this mean for these two? This is why that conversation between Jessica and Chani is important. And if they want to have anything to do with *Children of Dune*, Villaneuve has some fast explaining to do in the next movie. David Lynch's ending may have skipped some things but he also only had two hours for the book. Villaneuve's ending and omissions....well, it's just not right.

I know there has been the online chatter that this is Chani's story. I got nervous when Villaneuve said this because it's not. This book is very much about Paul's journey. Villaneuve did a great job on the adaptation in *Part One*, why feed into the "it has to be about the woman" culture? Well, *Part Two* is not Chani's story. It IS about Paul and it IS his story. She's very much apart of it, but it's not about her. I'm not sure why Villaneuve said what he said unless he meant Chani has a bigger role in *Part Two* than she did in *Part One* and he didn't fully develop his thought before speaking. But rest assured, it's not her story.

Other than that, I do recommend seeing it. I also recommend you re-watch *Part One* since this movie picks up where the other left off. I feel fairly satisfied and happy that any of my fears on how Villaneuve would handle the second half, especially with the internal dialog missing, were put to rest.

So go, play in the sand.





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***Monolith* Sets Up Nicely, But Doesn't Quite Pay Off**

Jason P Hunt

Monolith (2024)

Screenplay by Lucy Campbell

Produced by Bettina Hamilton

Directed by Matt Vesely

R, 1hr 34m

It's one of those stories that you don't expect to enjoy, but then it's one of those stories that ultimately doesn't *quite* get the ball over the goal line.

Monolith follows a newly minted podcast journalist (Lilly Sullivan) as she hides out at her parents' home while trying to rebuild her career. Her disgrace comes after a story she published went sideways on her, as she apparently didn't vet all of her sources properly. Now she has to carve out a new space for herself, and she finds herself hosting a new true-life mystery podcast without any clue how to start or what topic to cover.

And then she gets an e-mail.

This e-mail sends her down the trail of a series of mysterious incidents wherein a strange black brick suddenly appears in people's lives, without any clue as to how they arrived or what purpose they serve. Only that each one of them has unique properties, some of which might be directly tied to the recipient of each brick. And as "The Journalist" — she's never given a name — delves deeper into

the mystery, she starts to unravel an even bigger mystery. What are these bricks? Are they magic? Extra-terrestrial? Ordinary slabs of masonry? And what connection do they have to her own past?

In a post-pandemic world, this story resonates with the feelings many of us experienced. The isolation and paranoia grow as Sullivan's character puts together more and more information, building a wall of clues that could rival anything Charlie Day put together. It's her own "Wall of Weird" that serves as a way to keep the audience firmly on the journey of discovery that she's on — and with the movie being shot essentially in chronological order, Sullivan gets plenty of opportunity to lean into both the isolation and paranoia gradually as the wall gets more details added to it.

It is most definitely a character study more than it is a science fiction or horror story, and Sullivan delivers a compelling performance that keeps your attention and has you anticipating what may happen next — and it's just as likely you'll be wrong in that prediction until the "aha" moment that brings it all together.

Except it doesn't quite.

There's a missed opportunity here. The story starts to tease us with the question of whether this is all happening in The Journalist's head. Could she be slowly losing her mind in the rabbit hole of this mystery? Are these "black brick encounters" all just a conspiracy of people out to destroy what's left of her life? Could she be obsessing over a memory that drives her into delusions? Those questions are teased, but then the ending gives us an answer and sets up a larger scenario that we don't get to explore. It's a very long first act of ... something. And I'd like to see act two, but I don't think there's any more story. Lucy Campbell gives us an interesting setup and some questions about our protagonist, but ultimately, it doesn't really deliver the payoff it's been setting up.

From a conceptual perspective, I can see why this would play well at the film festivals, but narratively it's a little disappointing when we finally get to the root of the mystery and it just starts to swerve into something weird and then it just stops. We're left with a pretty burning question, one that doesn't really have much of a preliminary. There were a few places where the ending could have been earned a little more, maybe with an e-mail or a phone conversation. The clues we did get flow nicely one to the other, but there's not much to lay a foundation for what happens in the last ten minutes.

Having said that, I still think it's an interesting project, and it's worth a look. Sullivan delivers a tightly-wound performance that draws you in and centers the entire story on The Journalist. Her collaboration with director Vesely is one that really pulls together and gives her performance room to breathe. I just wish it hadn't taken so long to get where we were going, mainly because it feels like there's a lot of story left to tell and we haven't quite arrived yet. The Journalist is just at a point where things could get really creepy, depending on the answer to the question we're left with at the end.

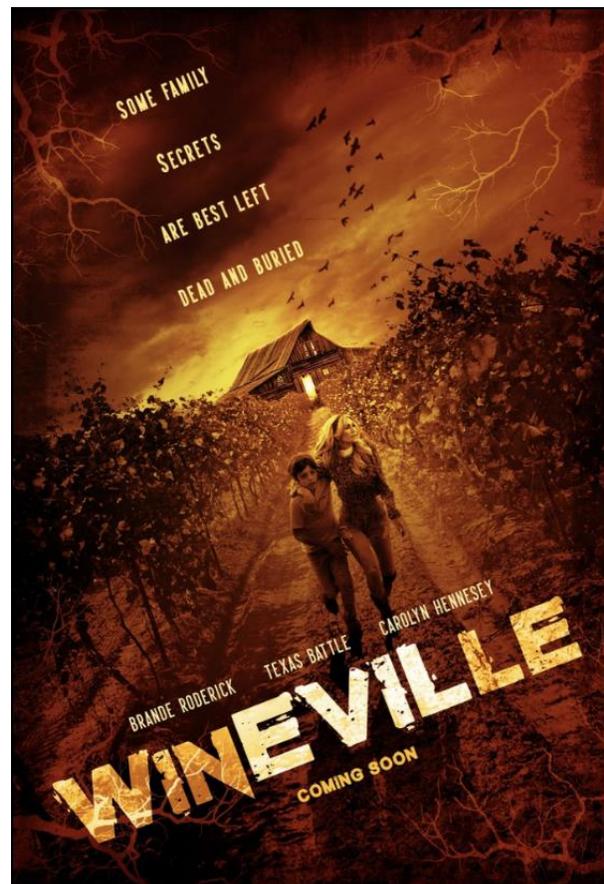
The other performances — the disembodied voices on the phone and computer calls — add to the overall effect as well. They give us glimpses into the bigger picture that The Journalist is trying to assemble, while at the same time they hover just out of reach and give us mere hints as to the nature of the various relationships Sullivan's character sees. Even though you can't see them, the people on the other end of the device gives us a general understanding of why she's having to start over as a journalist. It also allows for some creative ways to inject exposition without getting clunky.

Now, the fact that the audience is left holding that bag means that you can interpret the last few scenes any way you want, and there's some merit to that kind of storytelling. But for a lot of people, it may end up unsatisfying. "That's it?" you may ask, and you would be justified. But sometimes a storyteller makes a choice that we have to live with even though we don't like it, and Lucy Campbell made that choice here. It would have been relatively easy to drop a hint or two throughout the script that would give us the means to draw a conclusion, but the opportunity is missed, even though it's a clever script.

That's the frustrating thing. This has so much potential, and I liked what I saw. It's just that as a writer, I think there's needs to be maybe five more minutes at the end to give us just a little more clarity.

Despite its feeling somewhat incomplete, it's a good piece. Michael Tessari's cinematography gives us a color palette that most of the time teases that melancholy in The Journalist's life. There are occasional bursts of warmer tones, but overall it's cold and grey, which works to enhance her sense of isolation and lack of purpose. I think that this movie would have played very differently had it been warmly lit throughout. Plus, it connects with the dark and gloomy mystery of the black brick, which has Sullivan's character getting more agitated the further we go.

Overall, it's not a bad way to spend an hour and a half, despite the frustration you *might* experience at the end. It's not a franchise. It's not a \$300 million superhero popcorn flick. It engages the brain, makes you think, and that's a welcome alternative to smash-bang-pow.





WINEVILLE is a Barrel of Fun

Jason Nadler

Wineville (2023)

Written by Richard Schenkman

Produced by Richard Schenkman, Todd Slater, Robin DeMartino

Directed by Brande Roderick

Unrated, 1hr 39m

Wineville is the directorial debut of Brande Roderick (*Baywatch*, *Celebrity Apprentice*, *Playboy*), who also stars. Taking place in 1977, *Wineville* was once a real town where a horrific set of real killings took place. The Wineville Chicken Coup Murders took place between 1926 and 1928 and involved a mother, son, and nephew kidnapping, abusing, and murdering at least four boys before being caught. Claims of incest and abuse were lobbied by the accused as part of their defense during a trial so scandalous that the town of Wineville was renamed Mira Loma. Although mentioned in the movie as part of local lore, this is clearly where this movie's DNA originated from.

As with most horror movies, *Wineville* opens with a murder to set the stakes. A flirtatious woman is abducted after she attempts to help a handsome motorist and is swiftly and gruesomely dismembered.

Then the real movie begins: When Tess's father, Edmund Lott (played by Will Roberts) dies, Tess Lott (Brande Roderick) travels from Las Vegas to return to the family winery in Wineville. She hasn't been back since running away at sixteen and she is clearly not in the least bit upset by her father's passing. Along for the ride is her young son, Walter (Keaton Roderick Cadrez, Brande's actual son).

At the farm, Tess is reunited with her Aunt Margaret (Carolyn Hennesy), who is less than happy to see the now adult niece who ran away thirty years earlier. And she meets Joe Lott (Casey King), a

family nephew and handyman who Margaret explains they took in and raised after she disappeared. He's clearly the man we met during the open, abducting the woman. He seems charming and kind.

Walter is less than thrilled to be away from his home and stuck at some dusty farm, but he quickly is befriended by Joe, who shows him around the farm and many of its workings. Tess is eager to take ownership—since her father died without a will—and sell the farm, but Aunt Margaret is furious this will leave her homeless. For all Aunt Margaret's viciousness towards Tess, Joe treats her and Walter nicely. While we expect nothing good to come from Aunt Margaret, Joe's kindness manages to increase the tension, because his motives aren't clear and while he seems like a genuinely nice guy—as opposed to someone pretending to be—the audience already knows he's a threat.

Tess is haunted by her childhood experience at the farm, and as the movie progresses, we learn that she's been molested by her father and given birth to his child—who Aunt Margaret said did not survive. Sexual and physical abuse abounds in *Wineville*, giving the victims their strength to run away or their fear to remain. Much like the gore as victims are dismembered, the images of abuse are carefully timed to linger long enough to discomfort the viewer, but not so long as to become gratuitous. Roderick is clear in her direction: she is using triggering topics to play chicken with the audience, and she's not flinching first.

This is very much a throwback to the seventies horror genre, a specific niche of horror when practical effects had reached their pinnacle and every shot of gore *needed* to include pumping blood and every dismemberment displayed an understanding of anatomy. It also used themes of sexual abuse as motivation and oppression. Not all these themes have aged well.

During the flashback scenes, some of which are Tess' memories and others are true flashbacks to events she couldn't have been privy to, the screen narrows, and the movie gets the look, feel, and clacking projector sound of an old family movie. The first time it happened, I wasn't sure why Roderick had chosen this method of delivery, but in a later scene we get to see how home movies relate to the abuse suffered by young Joe at the hands of Aunt Margaret. Roderick uses the film within a film technique not just to reveal a memory, but to portray trauma in a dissociative way. These are the moments that have played over and over in these character's heads as they dealt with—but never recovered from their trauma. And while modern audiences may question the necessity of such scenes of incest and violence against women, it never strays too far from the very real themes presented by its source material—The Wineville Chicken Coop Murders.

There's a lot to like in *Wineville*. It stays true to its seventies horror roots, so when a character is too likeable—I'm looking at you, Sheriff Hicks (Texas Battle)—expectation is enough to sense peril before any danger has truly focused on them. There are several attempts at jump scares throughout the movie. Rather than use them for cheap scares, Roderick uses them as a form of misdirection. The movie's tension builds slowly, lulling the audience into a false sense of security, and the jump scares are both a reminder of the potential threats ahead and a suggestion that our expectations are misplaced. The movie unfolds well. There is never a moment that doesn't have use to the story, so it's one hour and forty-minute runtime feels well appropriated.

As the conclusion of the movie approaches and this disturbed family bonds, the threats and conflicts between them shift in subtle ways. There is a sense that the ending predetermined by the genre may not play out as expected. In the end, however, it does.

There is no surprise supernatural element responsible for this familial madness, no explanation beyond generations of abuse. While it drew Tess back, she was the only one strong enough to truly

escape it. It's a sad conclusion, one that turns biblically dark as the villains are dispatched. Nothing here is heavy handed, and the gratuitous images of gore become cathartic. This is no revenge story; the history of the family's abuse comes abruptly and jarringly to a close. Compared to the original Wineville murders, you might say this movie has a happy ending.

