Time Warped: "Looper," "Pitch Perfect," "Won't Back Down," and "House at the End of the Street"

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 01 October 2012 07:11

LOOPER

Rian Johnson's *Looper*, a time-travel thriller set primarily in the year 2044, casts Joseph Gordon-Levitt as a contract killer whose life is upended with the arrival of his latest target: his older self, who has been transported from the year 2074 and is played by Bruce Willis. This means that, with Gordon-Levitt delivering rather uncanny likenesses of his co-star's traditional scowls and smirks – and with the younger actor's countenance bizarrely altered to resemble the elder actor's familiar face – Willis essentially plays both leading roles ... which isn't the most enticing of setups if, like me, you generally find one Bruce Willis more than enough.

It turns out, though, that *Looper* is such an exceptional entertainment – so clever and thrilling and funny and oddly moving – that even six or seven Willises probably wouldn't have hurt it. (And for the record, the actor here gives one of his most forceful and compelling portrayals in years.) Writer/director Johnson's outing provides much the same outlandish, mind-blowing enjoyment as *Inception*, but in my opinion, it's a far leaner, sharper piece of work, and in a rarity for time-travel movies, the logistics of Johnson's storyline, as they're revealed, feel sound and satisfying. It might not be until the drive home that the film's narrative curlicues begin to unravel, and by then, you'll likely be in too exhilarated a mood to care.

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In deference to the film's savvy marketing (refreshingly, a goodly number of major plot points aren't even *hinted* at in the *Looper* trailers), I'm going to avoid specific discussion of what happens after Gordon-Levitt's character Joe meets Willis' older Joe; I entered the movie gratefully ignorant of its niceties and would prefer not to deprive others of that opportunity. I will say, however, that whatever means were required to make Gordon-Levitt look like the Willis of the mid-1980s – which, I'm guessing, involved a combination of prosthetics and CGI touch-ups – were hardly necessary, and occasionally make for an annoying distraction. Gordon-Levitt already does such a splendid job of mimicking Willis' externals and ironic readings that the visual trickery comes off as a serious encroachment on his performance, and a particularly gratuitous one considering that he doesn't resemble a young Willis all
that
much. (In the
New York Times
, reviewer Manohla Dargis nailed it when she wrote that Gordon-Levitt more successfully resembled the Japanese character that Marlon Brando played in
The Teahouse of the August Moon
.)

Yet beyond a few other random quibbles – such as one I have with the tacky, obvious green-screen effects employed whenever figures zip through the air on hover-bikes – Gordon-Levitt's morphed mug stands among the very few complaints I have with this beautifully paced, terrifically exciting achievement. The violence, when it comes, is fast and vicious yet never brutalizing for the audience, and Johnson proves himself a wizard at composition and narrative shorthand; one particularly lucid, engrossing montage follows Willis through 30 years of Joe's life, and offers a surprisingly rich and haunting assessment of this man's three decades in roughly 90 seconds of screen time. Delivering reams of wonderfully terse yet evocative dialogue, the film's supporting cast – a topnotch one boasting Emily Blunt, Jeff Daniels, Garrett Dillahunt, Paul Dano, and Noah Segan – grounds the fantastical happenings with true feeling, convincing you, as even *Inception* didn't fully, that the on-screen events actually *matter*. And while I wouldn't dream of giving away his purpose here, I'm not sure enough could be said about the acting feat of Pierce Gagnon, who couldn't have been even 10 years old at the time of filming, and whose hypnotic, scary, deeply mature performance might emerge at
Looper
's most profoundly – and deliriously entertaining – element. "He's a good kid," says Gordon-Levitt to Blunt. Oh no, he's not. He's a freaking
brilliant
kid.

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