

## "O" Why Did They Bother?: Also, "Jeepers Creepers"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 04 September 2001 18:00

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O

We've had so many reinterpretations of Shakespeare's classics in recent years, and so many that have been surprisingly fine (I'm thinking of *10 Things I Hate About You*, the Ethan Hawke *Hamlet*

, and the genre's standard-bearer, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*

), that you're inclined to give

O

, which sets *Othello* in the world of high-school basketball, the benefit of the doubt.

Even though the filmmakers jettison most of the play's political machinations, you're still left with a juicy tale of deceit, betrayal, and intrigue, one that would seem to perfectly fit the movie's agenda: Odin (Mekhi Phifer), the only black student on an elite, prep-school basketball team, is eventually destroyed, through self-doubt and jealousy, by his teammate and "friend," Hugo (Josh Hartnett). The best reason to see the movie, particularly if you've never experienced *Othe llo*

before, is its extraordinarily devious plot; the best reason to *avoid*

the movie is its actual presentation.

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For even though its aspirations are high, *O* resembles nothing so much as *Cruel Intentions*, in which Sarah Michelle Gellar and Ryan Phillippe enacted a modern-day version of Choderlos de Laclos'

*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

and turned their characters' viciousness into pure camp (and, it must be said, enjoyable camp).

But

*O*

is a weightier thing, and therefore, more embarrassing. Shakespeare's tragedy, it turns out, is simply too grand to be applied to this pipsqueaky tale of teenage angst.

In *O*, the characters follow the paths of their Shakespearean counterparts to the letter, but their actions no longer make sense. There's no way, for example, that Odin – whom Phifer plays as a smart kid with a healthy sense of humor – would become so violently jealous based merely on the shifty-eyed insinuations of Hugo, who comes off as little more than a somnambulant druggie. It's easy enough to see how Odin could doubt his girlfriend Desi's loyalty, considering how affectlessly Julia Stiles assays her role, but when the Shakespearean devices of the missing handkerchief and the eavesdropping on misunderstood conversations are used (without the accompanying poetry) in this setting, they seem merely like lazy ways of propelling the plot. (It's like wandering into a Very Special Episode of *Three's Company*.) And making Hugo – a character, we're told, that "everyone likes" – a teenage sociopath is a real cheat. Despite being given some motivation for his actions (Martin Sheen plays his aloof basketball-coach father, bellowing so loudly that I kept waiting for a heart attack that never came), Hugo does mean, insane things because, simply, he's mean and insane.

Director Tim Blake Nelson (the dimmest bulb in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*) doesn't do much to shape the material, and he makes the crucial mistake of peppering the film with a hip-hop soundtrack, which in its context is all wrong; Odin should feel like an outsider because his prep-school is

*oid*

of a hip-hop sensibility. The movie is undeniably compelling to watch – especially when it threatens to veer from Shakespeare's text with the humiliation of the Roderigo figure (Eldon Henson), and you get an inkling why the film was shelved for two years following 1999's Columbine tragedy – yet it's a hopelessly wrong-headed achievement. It's as if everyone involved in

*O*

was so caught up in bringing Shakespeare to the youthful masses that they didn't stop to question, given this particular Shakespearean work and this particular context, whether they even

*should*

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### ***JEEPERS CREEPERS***

Victor Salva's scare flick *Jeepers Creepers* opens with a half-hour so good that it's ... well, scary

On a road trip home from college, brother and sister Trish (Gina Philips) and Darius (Justin Long) travel along an unpopulated stretch of highway, bickering affectionately and casually goofing on one another. (Trish appears to be about a year older than her brother.) The duo's troubles begin when they're nearly run off the road by a sinister, souped-up truck with no visible driver –

#### *Duel Part Deux*

. They emerge from the incident unscathed, but a few miles down the road, they see the driver of said truck parked next to an abandoned church, dropping what looks like a corpse in a wrapped sheet down an outdoor drainpipe. After another, more damaging run-in with the truck, Trish and Darius – for reasons beyond comprehension – return to the church, and while looking down that drain pipe ... .

But let's stop there. By this point in the film, you might find yourself having a blast, shocked to discover that the hoary teens-in-peril genre is still capable of an occasional surprise.

Writer-director Salva does something that few horror filmmakers attempt anymore – he creates likable protagonists, and then gives them plenty of time to endear themselves to us before tightening the screws. When the anonymous teens in a movie like *I Know What You Did Last Summer* or *Urban Legend*

get attacked, no one cares; they haven't been established as human beings beforehand, so the evil things that happen to them carry no weight. (Many no doubt

prefer

that approach.) Yet Philips and Long play

#### *Creepers*

' heroes with such unforced naturalism and humor that you're on their side long before that monstrous truck makes its first appearance; anyone who's been involved in a raunchy badinage with a sibling, away from parental supervision, will recognize and like these characters from the start.

Salva also proves expert at the staging of horror-flick clichés. His highway chase scenes are

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marvelously tense, and he has a true gift for ominousness and dread; a lone image of the shadowy truck-driver watching the youths watch *him* can give you the heebie-jeebies. And even after the film's superior 30-minute intro, Salva pulls off terrific moments: There's a great background shot of the killer standing on the roof of a car that's following the teens and a creepy sequence involving Eileen Brennan as a haggard crone with dozens of cats, and the ending, though abrupt, is wildly, disturbingly subversive even considering the genre.

However, despite all these attributes, *Jeepers Creepers* winds up being silly as hell. Salva blows the film about halfway in by actually showing us his killer up close, and it turns out to be ... a guy in monster-movie latex. With wings. Who eats people. The idiocy of this revelation is matched by the rest of Salva's thudding clichés: the disbelieving, inept small-town police force, the psychic (Patricia Belcher) who has visions of impending doom, the recurring use of the movie's titular song, its purpose so arbitrary and inconsequential that you find it insulting. The first third of the film is impressive enough to make

*Jeepers Creepers*

a cut above your standard teen terror flick, but its all-but-inevitable descent into dopiness finally makes the movie more sad than scary.