

Fincher's Latest Leaves No Room for "Panic": "Panic Room" and "Death to Smoochy"

Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 02 April 2002 18:00

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PANIC ROOM

David Fincher can pull off some amazing tricks. Early on in *Panic Room*, the director's latest thriller, the camera, initially located in an upstairs bedroom where newly single mom Meg (Jodie Foster) rests, glides away from the bed, *through* the banister of the staircase, and down the flight of stairs, and then scoots through the kitchen – and, it must be added, over countertops and appliances – until it finally lands on the kitchen doorway, where a shady character is waiting to break in.

The whole move takes about 10 seconds of screen time, and although it's pretty obvious that some fancy-schmancy computer-generated imagery is being incorporated, it remains a knockout of a set piece, a bit of technical "Can you top this?" bravura that makes you eager to see what other visual treats are in store from this darkly playful maestro. All throughout *Panic Room*

Fincher and his topnotch cinematographers – Conrad Hall and Darius Khondji are both credited, though the whole film has Khondji's recognizable blue/gray imprint – work overtime to create a visually distinctive thriller; thank God for that, because it soon becomes apparent that the look of the film is the only thing it really has going for it.

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Foster's Meg is the recently divorced wife of a big-time pharmaceuticals entrepreneur, now moving into an enormous Manhattan brownstone with her teenage daughter, Sarah (Kristen Stewart), in tow. Among the dwelling's notable features is the panic room, a steel-encased sanctuary with a dozen TV monitors that allow viewpoints of every part of the house, and where, presumably, the rich and paranoid can hide from potential thieves and wait for rescue. But before mother and daughter can spend even one night in their new abode, three thieves (Forest Whitaker, Jared Leto, and Dwight Yoakam) enter the picture, chasing Meg and Sarah into said safe ground and demanding access to it, as it holds millions in loot left by the house's previous owner. What follows is a cat-and-mouse game in which our heroines attempt escape, the bad guys attempt entrance, and, naturally, the clock's ticking – did I mention the mother's claustrophobia and the daughter's need for an insulin shot to treat her diabetes?

Fincher is obviously working on a standard, though high-tech, genre piece, and there's nothing at all wrong with that; he and screenwriter David Koepp set up their scenario quickly, establish the rules of the game, and invite us to enjoy the thrills to follow. Yet the problem, sadly, is that the thrills *don't* follow, and you become aware that they won't right with the introduction of the villains, who are only slightly more threatening than Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern in the *Home Alone*

movies. I think we can all agree that a central ingredient in making a successful thriller is the creation of suitably scary adversaries, but

Panic Room

seems to go out of its way to show off its bad guys as buffoons (the film often resembles *Home Alone*

with better lighting). Whitaker, as is his wont even when his material doesn't call for it, is earnest and sweet, and revealed to be a family man doing this job strictly for the cash – fine, fine, but we're also stuck with Leto, overacting hysterically and delivering one unfunny, tension-deflating one-liner after another, and Yoakam, who's not bad when hidden under his ski mask, but who turns into a slavering, Jack Torrance knockoff without it. You can't take these three seriously for a moment, and their godawful work ruins whatever momentum the film initially established.

Even with suitable villains, though, *Panic Room* might have seemed rather padded and uneventful. While Koepp comes through with a few clever conceits – Meg managing to “hot-wire” her malfunctioning cell phone, for instance – there are only so many events that can happen when two-fifths of the film's cast is locked in a room the size of a walk-in closet. Numerous scenes – especially a protracted sequence when Meg, momentarily freed from the panic room, has to get rid of a police officer at her door and the film slows to a crawl – are extended so long that I found myself nearly groaning, and Fincher doesn't aid matters with his constant barrage of slow-motion images; the film runs 100 minutes and feels about twice the length.

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Foster, of course, employs her terrific gravity and urgency, which keeps us from remembering that she's actually playing Trophy Wife Who Discovers Strength After Divorce (Foster is a superb performer, but she's *no one's* idea of a trophy wife), and young Stewart matches her marvelously; she has the same tense, androgynous features we associate with Foster when she was a child actress. The movie, however, is unworthy of their efforts.

Panic Room

starts out edgy and spare, and is always visually commendable, but it's the opposite of an edge-of-your-seat thriller; it's more like a sit-back-and-wait-patiently-for-it-to-end thriller.



DEATH TO SMOOCHY

I was really, *really* looking forward to *Death to Smoochy*, the supposed black comedy about rival kiddie-show hosts and one clown's plan to murder the other. I guess I should have known better. Still, here's a short list of what I was anticipating: Danny DeVito helming (I still have happy memories of some of the nastier moments in his

Throw Momma from the Train

and

The War of the Roses

), Robin Williams escaping his grinning-munchkin roles and inhabiting a "dark" one, a supporting cast that features Catherine Keener, Jon Stewart, and Harvey Fierstein, and Edward Norton as ... oh, who the hell cares, it's Edward Norton, and he's as dependable a quality-barometer as you can get. But if you thought Whoopi Goldberg's Oscar shtick was stale, wait until you get a load of the comic gems

Smoochy

unleashes. Did you know that some clowns

aren't

jolly on the inside, but are, in actuality, hateful alcoholics who secretly detest children? That some TV producers will do

anything

for higher ratings, even at the expense of their performers? That we poor suckers will buy into their cheesy TV acts no matter how inept or unfunny the material is? Are you laughing yet?

DeVito and company present

Smoochy

as if the very

idea

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of strangling Barney and his ilk were the zenith in film satire, but it's such old news that even the movie's more amusing moments – like the sickeningly optimistic songs Norton's host numbs the children with – arrive covered in mothballs. Despite the efforts of the talented cast – unsurprisingly, Norton comes off best, though it's always great seeing Kenner's ferocity as a ruthless money-grubber – can't breathe life into this premise that, at best, is arriving 10 years too late; besides, didn't we all learn, as kids, that clowns are inherently evil? Where's the shock?