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## Movies: Magical "Moonlight," Not So "Creepy"

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**MOONLIGHT** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**CREEPY** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

When you go see the film *Moonlight*, it would help if you didn't think "Ok, Mr. one of the best movies of the year, show me what you got!" This film adapted and directed by Barry Jenkins (*Medicine For Melancholy*) actually IS one of the best films of the year. But it's a quiet, sneakily impressive movie whose intelligence and subtlety and refusal to wow are precisely what makes it so good.

Describing the plot — based on a play by the very talented Tarell Alvin McCraney — is misleading since it sounds like a jumble of cliches. Sensitive boy bullied by others, crack addict momma, gay coming of age, drug dealer with a heart of gold...ok, the last one isn't much of a cliche. Even the arty elements could be cliched — such as depicting little kids tumbling around in a park but scoring it with classical music cues rather than hip hop. But however hackneyed a summary may sound, the characters are all rich and full enough to bring them to life.

The story is structured in three parts: our hero as a little kid; our hero as a teenager and our hero as an adult struggling to connect with someone, anyone in his lonely life. Each section is fully absorbing, making you wish the movie would never move on to the next stage. And as soon as the next stage begins, you're caught up again. And it manages to turn a hand clutching sand on a beach into one of the sexiest moments of the year.

Every technical element of the film is superb, from the camerawork to the score to the editing. Above all, the acting is excellent. While *Moonlight* will rate highly with critics and end-of-the-year accolades, I assume most of the actors will be overlooked by the Academy Awards for various reasons: there's no lead performance (since three actors play both our hero and his best friend at various stages in their lives) and the story doesn't build to overblown Oscar-worthy moments. The exception may be Naomie Harris as our hero's mom, who does indeed get a heartbreaking scene of the sort that is perfect for clips. But I'll remember just as strongly Mahershala Ali, so wonderful as a father figure; the great pop star Janelle Monáe radiating strength and decency as one constant adult presence and all the actors who embodied the young men we follow from boys to men. And yes, it's one of the year's best films.

The same cannot be said for the latest from prolific Japanese director Kiyoshi Kurosawa. He's known for creating unconventional horror and thrillers, movies that like *Moonlight* strive to subvert our expectations. You might get a sense of dread in a Kurosawa film, but it's just as likely to come from unease over the ills of society or environmental degradation as it is from a killer on the loose.

But very little of that cross-pollination of genres and styles is evident in *by the*, a conventional, slow-burning thriller that smolders out without ever catching fire. Our hero is a police profiler who we see at the beginning in a public confrontation with a psychopath. It goes terribly wrong and he leaves the force, moving his wife to a new home and taking a job as a professor. Naturally, the past won't let go and he's drawn back into working on a cold case by a younger colleague who looks like he should be singing in a j-pop band rather than working as a detective. At the same time, he and his attractive wife find themselves continually crossing paths with their creepy new neighbor, a man who can't help but echo the creepy but mysterious neighbor that loomed large in the cold case from all those years ago. Hmm...

Kurosawa is known for his unconventional spin on genre in films like *Pulse* and *Bright Future* and even his stabs at family drama like *Tokyo Sonata*. But here the plotting is almost proudly pedestrian, the sort of story that would change dramatically if any of the characters ever behaved normally. The husband is confronted by their creepy neighbor who claims the wife is harassing the man. The wife is confronted by the creepy neighbor who hits on her. Naturally, neither says a word to the other, even though the man wants the husband to keep her from “bothering” him. The creepy neighbor’s daughter desperately warns away the wife from coming into their home when the man tries to lure her in; she begs off, but never mentions how freaked out she was to her husband. Then the daughter confesses to the husband that the creepy neighbor isn’t her dad at all but runs off before she can explain herself. The husband does nothing. When he has a confrontation with the man, cops show up...and bundle the former detective off in their car to arrest him, never even questioning the creepy neighbor or taking the side of a one-time colleague as they would. When a detective is found dead in the house next to the creepy neighbor and the husband is questioned, he fails to mention he’d asked the colleague to check up on the creepy neighbor. When a top police official rushes out of headquarters loudly saying they need to track down the creepy neighbor who was there to give his statement and then the top police official goes missing, no one ever seems to think to check up on the creepy neighbor. And no one ever ever calls for backup.

It all climaxes with a finale so resolutely un-climactic that you long to find some higher purpose or telling commentary embedded in this story. But the pat suggestion towards the end that the hero’s marriage was rocky wasn’t suggested by anything that came before. (It’s also a cliché to let horror or thriller plots reveal the troubled family, isn’t it?) And if there was any thought given to showing how isolated we are now from our neighbors, that too is never developed in any way. It’s just an unremarkable story of a serial killer that doesn’t even benefit from Kurosawa’s usual proclivity for messing with expectations. The creepiest element of *Creepy* is how conventional it proves from start to finish.

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