

New York Film Festival 2014 #4: PTA's 'Inherent Vice' Stumbles In

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INHERENT VICE ** 1/2 out of ****

NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL

Sometimes, instead of reviewing the movie you're watching, you end up reviewing the movie you thought you'd be watching. This happens especially with a director known for a particular style or genre who then switches it up (something you urge them to do until they actually do) or with a film that's a remake or based on another medium, like a book or play. It takes a while to dismiss the movie you expected and start to pay attention to the movie they actually made.

That is surely the case with writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice*, the first film based on a work by Thomas Pynchon. It's the centerpiece of the [52nd New York Film Festival](#). Pynchon's comic work was a loopy, nutty story that used the detective noir genre to riff almost manically on pop culture. It had an undertone of despair for America and the people trapped in its machinery. Anderson flips that tonally: the movie *Inherent Vice* is serious, far more Chinatown than *The Big Lebowski* or even Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye*, though it has a comic undertone snaking through it. It is, quite simply, not the movie I expected.

Of course my main expectation was greatness: ever since *Sidney* aka *Hard Eight*, every film of Anderson's has been on my best of the year list. *Magnolia* was the most problematic for me, though it had bravura passages indeed. But *Boogie Nights* and *Punch-Drunk Love* and especially *There Will Be Blood* and *The Master*? All terrific and memorable. So like a sincere but cliched breakup ("It's me, not you!") believe me when I say I'll be watching the movie again, once my mind is clear and I'm ready to see the movie he made without it battling in my brain with the movie I anticipated.

The trailer didn't help. It's comic and loose and fizzy and captures tonally exactly what I thought I was in for. It's very good, right down to the playful kicker "Coming just in time for Christmas!" What it doesn't do is capture the mood of the film Anderson delivered.

The story is a confused tale of dark conspiracies. Doc (Joaquin Phoenix) is a shambling private eye in 1970 Los Angeles. An old flame walks in and sexily pleads for help. Shasta (Katherine Waterston) is the mistress of a powerful real estate developer who goes around surrounded by a biker gang of neo-Nazis for security. Shasta has been approached by this man's wife and her lover: they want to dispatch the guy to a loony bin and steal all his money with Shasta's help. But there's more: corruption in the LAPD, heroin, a mysterious organization called *The Golden Fang* and the realization that a whole lot of people want this developer disappeared because he's had some sort of hippie epiphany and wants to build housing and give it away for free to anyone who needs it.

Mixed in there is another storyline, one that inevitably crosses paths with our main mystery. In this case, the wife (Jena Malone) of the semi-legendary saxophone player of a rock and roll band specializing in surf music (Owen Wilson) wants Doc to track down her husband because he's disappeared. Or dead. Or come back to life. Turns out this sax man is more of a Zelig, popping up here and there as a snitch for the cops and the Feds who goes undercover in hippie and black power groups to sniff out information he can flip to the authorities.

In Pynchon's novel, the conspiracies get wilder and wilder, pinwheeling out until they encompass pretty much

the entire country. In the film, the conspiracies remain far more streamlined though just as murky and confusing as the conspiracies in Chinatown. We might suss out a piece of the puzzle here and there, but the forces at play remain beyond our grasp.

So it's all about mood and style and the personal stakes involved, namely the question of whether Doc can rescue his old flame from this mess and win her back, if indeed that's what either of them wants. The craft on display is obvious, though the boxed-in style of the film imagery (to reflect the trapped existence of most people in America?) isn't as compelling as the brilliant work on *The Master* and his other films.

And the cast -- many of whom have modest cameos -- is generally faultless. Phoenix delivers the more serious spin on Doc that Anderson wanted and of course is always watchable. Pretty much anyone you name is great moment to moment, from Reese Witherspoon as a rising D.A. and Doc's current squeeze to Jena Malone to Katherine Waterston as Doc's Shasta to Martin Short and on and on, up and down the line. I found Owen Wilson the least convincing mainly because his character seemed adrift in the story, with no clear focus. Perhaps because they had the comic zip of the novel, I especially liked Hong Chau as Jade and especially Josh Brolin as the detective "Bigfoot" Bjornsen. Brolin has almost never had a chance to display his comic skills (let's just forget about *Men In Black 3*) but he's hilariously good here, whether gobbling down weed, brusquely ordering more pancakes or kicking down Doc's door.

I can't help wishing the entire film had Brolin's verve and humorous punch. But Anderson has been too good for too long: I want to see it again. Sometimes you don't want to see a movie again (certainly not right away) because you liked it so much and you don't want to risk spoiling the experience by trying to recapture it again right away. (I waited a few years to see *The Thin Red Line* a second time and had the happy pleasure of realizing it was just as great as I'd thought and indeed even better.) Sometimes you do want to see a movie again because you didn't like it. But maybe you weren't in the right mood or you had too strong an idea of what it should be (because you just read the book) or you just know everyone involved is too talented to dismiss out of hand. It's usually the movie and your opinion doesn't usually change dramatically. But it happens. And surely Anderson has earned the right to not be dismissed at first blush. Still, *Inherent Vice* is a mixed bag and certain to be one of the disappointments of the year. But if it gives Brolin access to an out and out comedy, it'll be worth it.

NOTE: By the way, if you're wondering what Pynchon sounds like, *The Wall Street Journal* insists that it's his voice on this promo clip released when *Inherent Vice* was published.

MOVIES I'VE SEEN SO FAR IN 2014 (not a good year for movie-going for me)

All ratings out of four stars.

1. *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) **
2. *20 Feet From Stardom* **
3. *The Wolf Of Wall Street* ** 1/2
4. *In The House* (Ozon) ***
5. *Laurence Anyways* *** 1/2
6. *The Angels' Share* ***
7. *Philomena* **
8. *Mad Love* (1935 w Peter Lorre) *
9. *Women In The Wind* (1939 w Kay Francis) **
10. *The Hunt* *** 1/2
11. *Happy People: A Year In The Taiga* ***
12. *The Painting* ** 1/2
13. *The Spectacular Now* *** 1/2
14. *Dallas Buyers Club* * 1/2
15. *Blue Jasmine* ** 1/2