

by Kimberly_Gadette

Movie Review of "ALPHA DOG"

"Alpha Dog" takes place in the San Gabriel Valley, the other, lesser known "Valley" that is adjacent to Los Angeles. Aside from upper crust Pasadena and San Marino, this Valley comes in as the redheaded stepsister to the much better known, much wealthier San Fernando Valley. With an idolized picture of crimelord Tony "Scarface" Montana on his wall, Johnny Truelove wants to be #1 as much as the valley he lives in. His is a fictionalized accounting of Jesse James Hollywood, currently on trial for the actions as dramatized in this film. No Jesse James, no Hollywood celeb, Emile Hirsch's Johnny has to settle for sloppy seconds all the way, from his white Little League friends turned quasi-gangsta, imitating the real street thugs, to his minor dealing in secondary drugs, to the bungling of a mismanaged, impulsive kidnapping gone wrong.

The movie itself also tries to run with the big dogs, with slick split screens, occasional cinema verit  interviews straight to camera, the pumping, thumping iPod-ready soundtrack. But aside from quality performances by Ben Foster, Anton Yelchin and who knew? Justin Timberlake, the movie suffers from a large overdose of been-there-done-that.

The plot: meth junkie Jake Mazursky (Ben Foster) owes Johnny \$1200 for drugs but can't pay. The feud turns fierce. Presented with an unexpected opportunity, Johnny takes revenge by kidnapping Jake's 15-year-old kid brother Zack (Anton Yelchin). But it quickly turns from abduction into good times for the nicknamed "Stolen Boy," who is affectionately treated as a little brother, bonding in particular with peacemaker/sidekick Frankie (Justin Timberlake). Little Zack is loving every minute, especially since he's being treated to drugs and first-time sex with beautiful babes. When Jake can't be located, and Johnny learns that kidnapping carries a severe sentence, he comes to a conclusion that is mind-boggling stupid. Hey, Johnny  maybe if you'd stayed in school, things would have worked out better?

"Alpha Dog" is making all sorts of waves, but not necessarily based on its merit. With the real case against Jesse James Hollywood pending, there's been constant media reports on concerns over jury-tainting, attorneys being removed due to inappropriate consultation on the film  and then there's the buzz on Justin Timberlake showing up on celluloid as a bona fide actor. If only the script were as fascinating as the off-camera drama, this could be one heck of a picture! But sadly, no. Spoiled teens with nothing but time and money aren't all that compelling. The pacing leading up to the resolution needs a hefty dose of amphetamines. The preaching about the fact that the parents need to amp up their involvement in their children's lives seems more unbelievable than Sharon Stone's fat suit.

If Director Nick Cassavetes had assigned a scriptwriter to the project other than himself, perhaps there might have been much more to "Alpha Dog." Though the Frankie/Zack relationship was highly affecting, an even deeper exploration would have been welcome. With Ben Foster evolving as an actor with each new performance ("X-Men," three seasons of "Six Feet Under,") the concept of more Jakeâ€™ of a less scatological natureâ€™ could have added a great deal. As for Anton Yelchin, this young performer ("Huff," "Delivering Milo") has an unmatched sweetness and a clear-eyed honesty that gives the film its heart.

All in all, "Alpha Dog" seems to be a training film of sorts, for both Nick Cassavetes, who is still finding his voice, and for the latest wave of male actors who are on the right track to creating some very exciting, future film magic.

Grading this movie on the curve of the Deschutes River: C-plus

[Click here to see the movie trailer for "Alpha Dog".](#)

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Production Credits: "Alpha Dog" Directed by: Nick Cassavetes Screenplay by: Nick Cassavetes
Cast: Emile Hirsch, Ben Foster, Anton Yelchin, Shawn Hatosy, Christopher Marquette, Sharon Stone, Justin Timberlake, Bruce Willis Rated: R Running Time: 117 minutes Grade: C-plus

The Screen Savor: "Valley Boys"™ by Kimberly_Gadette