

Movie Review: "Black Snake Moan"™

by David_Elliott

Perhaps not since Susan George slathered her body all over Sam Peckinpah's "Straw Dogs" (1971) has an actress achieved such sluttiness as Christina Ricci in "Black Snake Moan."

The title alone should warn off Ricci's early fans, who loved the moon-faced cutie of "The Addams Family" (1991). That girl is gone. Now, as sexpot Rae, Ricci is slenderly nubile and runs around clothed in sweat, a skimpy half-top and tiny panties.

'BLACK SNAKE MOAN' - Samuel L. Jackson plays a bluesman who helps a wild young woman deal with her emotional problems in the drama 'Black Snake Moan.' CNS Photo courtesy of Bruce Talamon. Old abuse vibes trigger nymphomania in Rae, who adores bullet-headed lover Ronnie (Justin Timberlake) but, once he exits, is available to his best friend and other studs. Maybe it's the Dixie town in which Joanne Woodward ("The Fugitive Kind," 1959) was a sexy white snake moaning, "I'm gonna show 'em just how lewd a lewd vagrant can be."

With less verve, Rae is a waif-eyed young woman, treated as less than a whore. Director and writer Craig Brewer wallows luridly with her, while Samuel L. Jackson steals the movie as Laz (Lazarus).

Jackson uncoils better than in "Snakes on a Plane," and sings (not badly) the menacing title song.

Retired bluesman Laz is balding, creaky and down to subsistence farming. His booster is a preacher pal (fine John Cothran Jr.). When Laz discovers Rae bloodily beaten on the road after her latest rape encounter, he takes her in, charitably.

The ruling idea is that Laz, though full of blues old and new, will deny himself devil lust and so save them both. The font is country religion, but the flow is music. Laz seduces Rae spiritually, with kindness and the blues, and his groany voice and guitar licks during a thunderstorm shape a bonding that is shared and sexless.

The film salutes the Southern seam of black funk as soul truth. As piously pandering pulp, it goes beyond "Crossroads" (1986). What mainly jives it is Jackson, in funny scenes with food, a Bible, a long chain, a sweet lady, a teen boy and joyously vulgar Jacksonisms in his song lyrics.

Like Brewer's more tightly plotted and music-driven "Hustle & Flow," the fun gets pressed into some labored payoffs. Jackson may be playing an old dude, but the movie still feels like a B-picture showcase for him (Ricci, barely verbal, seems like crowd bait).

There are facile abortion mentions and dim stuff about Rae's miserable mother. But the movie snakes along with an earthy hiss, thanks to music, Jackson and Ricci's painful availability.

A Paramount Vantage release. Director, writer: Craig Brewer. Cast: Samuel L. Jackson, Christina Ricci, Justin Timberlake, John Cothran Jr., Michael Raymond-James. Running time: 1 hour, 56 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

RATINGS 4 stars - Excellent.

3 stars - Worthy.

2 stars - Mixed.

1 star - Poor.

0 stars - Forget it.

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