

The Secret Life of Bees

A Bugonia Review

By: Adam Dombrow

One of the more intriguing films garnering a nomination for Best Picture this year at the Academy Awards is Yorgos Lanthimos' *Bugonia*. After missing the cut last year with *Kinds of Kindness*, Lanthimos (and Emma Stone) are back with a kidnap movie where there *could be* some serious, sinister undertones. The fact that you know this from the trailer is where I want to start my review.

Lanthimos films for me are kind of a hard sell in terms of subject matter; while I happen to like his kind of quirky approach towards telling tales about humanity and morality, they never really feel "must see" for me. Based on the trailer though, *Bugonia* felt kind of different from the start, as it seemed to offer more than just a whimsical and abstract character study akin to Lanthimos' previous offerings, which made me take notice. The problem: the trailer also gives away way too much of the premise of this movie, and it does itself a major disservice in doing so. I'm not going to spoil whether or not Michelle is an alien, but the fact that you know it is even a possibility based on the trailer is a major bummer, and takes away what could have been a serious shocker of a subplot for the audience.

Over-sharing in the trailer aside, I will say *Bugonia* is probably my favorite of the limited number of Lanthimos films I've seen. It still has all of the hallmarks I have come to expect from Lanthimos: strong performances, strange, complex characters, intricate plot, etc, but it also offers something that I feel his other films (that I've seen) lack: superb pacing. Coming in at just under two hours, *Bugonia* sticks and moves, never fully giving the viewer enough of a chance to catch

their breath. The pacing works wonders for a suspense film where each scene carries weight and discombobulates you. The final 30 mins or so of this movie are full on. balls-to-the-wall madness!

Further adding to that sense of discombobulation is incredible cinematography work by frequent Lanthimos collaborator Robbie Ryan. There are more than a few shots in this movie (including the entire ending) that are painstakingly beautiful, like you could show me production stills and I would say “that’s a cool shot”. I must emphasize the kind of jagged framing on the exterior shots of Teddy’s house—framing that is very reminiscent of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. This framing, coupled with an absolutely sinister score by Jerskin Fendrix is pure chef’s kiss. Ryan not receiving a nomination for cinematography (kudos to Fendrix for receiving a nomination for the scoring) is one of 3 snubs for this movie!

Emma Stone rightfully earns her nomination here, offering up a performance that provides so many different layers. She goes from seemingly being helpless and afraid to being sinister and manipulative at the drop of a dime, and it’s (in my opinion) a way better performance than that of Bella Baxter in *Poor Things* which she won her last Best Actress award for. It is the other 2 performances here where Oscar snubs in the acting category take place. Jesse Plemons *not* receiving a nomination for best actor is completely criminal! Plemons is magnificent, offering a performance that is a level of unhinged rarely seen since Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* (another snub, if I do say so myself). Plemons' conviction fully convinces the audience that, while he might just be a stark raving lunatic, there is a chance he might be right! The other snub for acting is newcomer Aiden Delbis, whose performance as Don really strikes a balance

between batshit Plemons and master manipulator Stone. Don's childlike hero worship of his cousin really forms the film's emotional foundation, a foundation which becomes essential to the film's final act.

Bugonia provides a sharp critique of the current landscape that we as Americans seem to be trapped in: one where working class stiff's are being exploited (and seemingly targeted for extermination) by an elite upperclass that is almost otherworldly in their cruelty, yet one where it is also difficult to trust *anything* based on how outlandish some of the conspiracy theories are. The film is a masterfully shot and scored fever dream with a mesmerizing final act that just levels you, and should have provided one of the more talked about, controversial endings of the year!