

## *When One Door Opens...*

A *Backrooms* Review

By: Adam Dombrow

It seems like every year for the past few years, said year has gotten labeled as “going to be *the* year” for horror. I have heard/read this multiple times already, with movies like *Backrooms* and *Obsession* being two of the bigger talked about/hyped releases for the first half of the year. While I did feel that *Obsession* lived up to *some* of the early hype (it doesn’t even come close to the hype that it has gotten since it opened—if this is the best horror movie of the year, we have a serious problem), in my review I said that it was a film which I personally didn’t feel was very fun, and that I never have to watch again. Truthfully, I had higher *hopes* for *Backrooms*. Those hopes existed based purely on concept: unlike the “be careful what you wish for” genre, we haven’t seen many “seemingly self-building buildings” movies. The concept—coupled with my hoping that this would be more of a mystery film—really appealed to me. I also must preface this review by saying that I have **not** watched the webseries which inspired the movie.

So does *Backrooms* live up to the early hype? In my opinion: kind of, but it will no doubt be one of the more divisive horror movies this year.

Let’s start then with the concept, as that was what I was initially intrigued by. *Backrooms*’ self-building rooms concept still feels pretty original, but I have to assume that creator/director Kane Parsons is a gamer, because while watching *Backrooms* all I could think about was the 2019 video game *Control*. I’m not saying Parsons *stole* the idea, but man, it’s hard not to see so many similar elements: from self multiplying objects, to distorted room structures, etc, *all* of

these things are in *Control*, and are way more fun! I'm not going to lie: once I got the *Control* vibe, it was literally all that I could picture while watching *Backrooms*, and it made me both want *Backrooms* to now do something original, and it also made me want to play *Control* again (or maybe *Alan Wake II*, so that I am rightfully prepared for *Control Resonant*). If that game wasn't the inspiration for *Backrooms*, then surely the Winchester Mystery House was.

Comparing the set design to the Winchester Mystery House is very apropos, and is a great jumping off point to discussing the visual style of *Backrooms*. Production designer Danny Vermette is the unsung hero of *Backrooms* without question, as his supposedly 37,000-square-foot maze is totally the star of the entire movie. Vermette's sets (very fun to say) are so good that they almost take away from the plot and pacing of the film—I became much more intrigued with the notion of exploring the backrooms themselves than I did the film's underlying mystery. What ended up dragging me back into the plot were *Backrooms*' analog scenes—which, visually, are the best parts of the entire movie. Kudos to Parsons for making the shooting of said scenes a plot point, and kudos to cinematographer Jeremy Cox for both his brilliant filming of said scenes, as well as his mastery in terms of making the film *feel* big or small depending on what the scene calls for. Special shout out to sound designer Eugenio Battaglia, whose use of sound in the movie is a total work of art that fully enhances the visual—the mixing of quiet and spatial sound effects in *Backrooms* delightfully plays with the viewer's spatial awareness, aiding in making us feel totally trapped in the labyrinth of the rooms themselves. Truly the look/style of *Backrooms* is the film's saving grace.

So if the look/style of *Backrooms* are its saving grace, what then of the pacing and plot? I gotta be honest: both are just okay. As I mentioned before, I had much more fun with the idea of actually *traversing/exploring* the backrooms than I did about finding out *what* they were/how they are made. Quite frankly, I had an expectation of what I *thought* the backrooms would amount to actually being or representing, and I felt like the film does *that* reveal pretty decisively by its end—legitimately there is a conversation that *should* be had about the film’s psychological meaning. Pacing wise, I gotta tell you, there are a lot of people who will absolutely **hate** *Backrooms* because it is *another* very slow burn movie. I felt that Parson’s non-linear plot reveals are done well, but there is *a lot* of downtime/empty space in between, and some of the plot reveal transitions are handled more poorly than others. That being said, *Backrooms* is really not scary **at all** except for maybe one jump scare and the film’s climax (which, again, felt like it was ripped out of video games, this time being *Resident Evil 2* and *Resident Evil Nemesis*). There was definitely room for scares, but we have to chalk that up as being a missed opportunity.

I would be remiss if I didn’t at least mention the acting efforts by *Backrooms*’ two leads Chiwetel Ejofor and Renate Reinsve. Ejofor for my money can literally do anything—he’s amazing in every performance—and he is given a handful of moments to shine in *Backrooms* where he once again displays his versatility. For her part (interestingly enough for anyone who saw last year’s *Sentimental Value*, where she plays the exact opposite role), Reinsve gets to play the strong, silent, haunted psychiatrist who gets sucked into the world of *Backrooms*. Both actors do great jobs with what they are given, but the acting really does end up taking a backseat to the rooms themselves. Special shout out to Lukita Maxwell; Maxwell doesn’t really have much screen time here, but she will always hold a special place in my heart due to the show *Shrinking*

(which has been somewhat of a curious foil to my life over the past three years), so seeing her in *anything* always brings me a sense of comfort and joy!

While *Backrooms* didn't really hit my horror sweet spot, and it never rises quite to the level of expectations set by the uniqueness of its premise, it is a fun, original feeling movie that I could see myself revisiting, but I can guarantee that sentiment will only be felt by maybe half to 65% of the film's viewers. I just feel that *Backrooms* would make for a better gaming experience (if you are a gamer, go play *Control*) or maybe as an escape room experience (if someone wants to license it) than it does a movie, but that isn't to say it isn't a well crafted, entertaining exploit worthy of seeing on as big a screen as possible.