Welcome to Primetime

A *Primetime* Review

By: Adam Dombrow

It's almost difficult to recall a time when reality tv *felt real*, and not this over-produced, staged, gimmicky *thing* that it has been for the last thirty years . "Reality tv" has been around since the 1940s through various filmed "social experiments", but I would argue that it wasn't until the 90s that it solidified into its current format. Shows like *The Real World* and *Big Brother* (which was ironically named based on Orwell's novel *1984*) changed the game: modern audiences *craved* schadenfreude, necessitating heavy studio interference and manipulation in efforts to "push the envelope". Almost nothing could do *that* quite like a series depicting pedophiles unknowingly showing up to receive their own planned "just desserts" (often "homemade" cookies).

Enter journalist and *Dateline NBC* correspondent Chris Hansen, teaming with anti child endangerment organization Perverted-Justice. Together–starting in 2004 and culminating with the show's cancellation by NBC in December 2008–Hansen and PeeJ (weird abbreviation) conducted 11 major sting operations, leading to 200 indictments and over 120 convictions.

Say what you want about *To Catch a Predator*, or Hansen himself, and whether or not a movie about those topics will interest you. The film is no doubt **not** going to be for everyone, but *Primetime* is one of *my* top 5 films of the year so far!

I think a good place to start my review is by explaining that it is a *slow burn* psychological thriller bordering on full-blown analog horror (which I will address later on),

whose intention is to show that there are *different types* of "predators". *Primetime*'s plot revolves around the intersecting story arcs of the *To Catch a Predator* crew: Hansen himself, his producer Andie Bender, lead "decoy" Dan Plum, and PeeJ founder/online pedophile chat lurker Xavier Von Erck, Each character depicts almost a different version of what it is to "be predatory": Hansen is a narcissistic, master manipulator, Bender is a shark who is thirsty for ratings, Plum is an up-and-coming actor desperate for his "big break", and Von Erck spends his days and nights cruising the web seeking out pedophiles (need I say more). Each character plays an essential part to the success of *To Catch a Predator*, but each comes with their own unique baggage, and by the end they are *all* forever changed!

The film's performances are **phenomenal**. Robert Pattinson could very well be nominated for both Best Supporting Actor (for *The Odyssey) as well as* Best Actor for his portrayal of Hansen here. Pattinson fully reminded me of Christian Bale as Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*: there's a certain radiance and charm to him, but you always *feel* like there is something dark lurking below the surface I couldn't help but chuckle at first at the scenes where Hansen is "hyping" himself up to confront the predators by reading their chatlogs, but by the end Pattinson's performance makes you *feel* that there is a certain kind of *madness* that most likely comes from *being* this "crusader" who seeks out what is almost *vigilante justice*. Pattinson delivers a powerhouse performance where he makes it impossible for the viewer to focus on anyone else but him in every scene he's in.

The Walking Dead alum Merritt Wever plays fictional producer Andie Bender. Bender is an interesting case study because she really represents the cyclical nature of abuse. Wever (in an interview with Rogerebert.com) described her character as being "slightly masochistic" - Bender

lashes out at *almost every* character in the movie at one point or another. For me, the most fascinating moments of Wever's performance are when she is watching the busts happen in real time: Bender displays this *morbid* fascination with the encounters, no doubt becoming a metaphorical stand-in for the *TCAP* viewers themselves.

Skyler Gisondo (of *The Righteous Gemstones* fame) gives a different, more layered performance than anything I'd seen from him previously as "Decoy" Dan Plum. In one of the movie's more amusing (yet also completely disturbing, given the nature of it) scenes, Gisondo is given free range to *ham it up* while searching for Plum's teenage persona, look, and voice; but this only happens *after* his initial, *extremely* jarring first encounter with a predator (which–sorry for the spoiler–contains full frontal male nudity). Plum is completely thrown into the deep end, and Gisondo is tasked with representing the film's big "what if": what if doing this–catching these people, and absolutely ruining their lives, as well as possibly ruining the lives of their loved ones–is in and of itself evil? It's a fascinating conundrum, and it provides a (in my opinion) starmaking performance for Gisondo. Special acting kudos go out to Phoebe Bridgers, who makes her feature film debut (not playing herself) as the OG decoy, Del.

More fascinating (to me at least) than *Primetime*'s plot and the acting, though, are the advanced techniques on display from longtime documentary/first time feature director Lance Oppenheim, as well as his longtime documentary cinematographer David Bolen. Oppenheim and Bolen deliver this *really* trippy genre-blend here: *Primetime* beautifully transitions from psychological thriller, to dramatic character study, to full on analog horror film, at times giving us vibes ranging from Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, to a Cohen Brothers crime drama, to a vignette straight out of the *V/H/S* franchise. Oppenheim and Bolen bust out some of

the tricks they've learned from documentary filmmaking: you have these scenes that have real true crime feeling, "found footage" shots, mixed up with analog shots fully reminiscent of a home movie that *you aren't meant to be watching*, all capped off by this narrow 1:50:1 to 1:33:1 (4:3–I know this is a lot of techie filmmaker jargon, my apologies) aspect ratio *throughout*, all of which are coupled with a grainy, home movie anesthetic, which really add up to this strange sense of voyeurism. *Primetime*'s sound design (I couldn't really find someone who was actually accredited solely for the sound design) by the c5 Sound Crew is fantastic - the placement or non-placement of sounds and scoring truly enhance the feeling of each scene. Composer Ari Balouzian creates a score that is, at times, very reminiscent of the film noirs from the 40s and 50s, and at other times have these surreal, sweeping pieces that almost feel like "a ha" moments!

Like I said early on in this review, *Primetime* is **not** going to be for everyone: some people undoubtedly will find its premise "slow" because it doesn't focus on action per se, but more so on the effects of the show itself upon its players, and how it slowly corrupts each of them. If you are a person who enjoys something akin to an arthouse (it is A24 afterall…), voyeuristic, true crime, analog horror/found footage, character study (God that was a mouthful), then there is **A LOT** to love here!