

METHOD TO MADNESSES



'Julien Donkey-Boy' brings technology, oddity to screen



Top: Chloe Sevigny as Pearl with Chrissy Kobylak as Chrissy star in "Julien Donkey-Boy," which opens this weekend at the Mary Riepma Ross Film Theater.

Left: Werner Herzog stars as Father in "Julien Donkey-Boy," a film that captures the lifestyle of a family with a schizophrenic member.

By Jason Hardy

Staff writer

In 1998, noted director Harmony Korine embarked on an audacious attempt to create a film that captures the essence of schizophrenia.

Not only that, but he shot it live.

"Julien Donkey-Boy," the first American film to be certified by the strictly realist Danish group, Dogme 95, was filmed entirely on Digital Video cameras and was done without the aid of a formal script, leaving much of it to be improvised.

Despite what seemed like incredible demands, Korine, most widely known as the screenwriter for "Kids" and the director of "Gummo," succeeded in creating a film that is about as unsettling to watch as one would imagine schizophrenia is to experience.

This is a disturbing film.

From the start it is obvious that "Julien Donkey-Boy" is something very different. The DV format, which was later transferred to 16mm reversal stock and blown up with an optical printer before finally being transferred again to 35 mm, creates a haunting effect.

The high contrast and grainy on-screen appearance produces a very intense pallet of colors for Korine and the actors to work with. Korine creates a neurotic effect by combining the overly sharpened, burned-out visual setting with various oddly placed camera angles and movements, some very close angles, seeming intrusive and spy-like, and others that quickly rock back and forth, creating a more rhythmic sense of madness.

The end result is a film that feels incredibly real, which is part of what makes it so disturbing. A large part of this realism stems from the fact that many of the people in the film aren't actors, but people who were randomly found on location and included in the shots. Ultimately, this film couldn't have been made any other way.

"Julien Donkey-Boy" is centered around Julien (Ewen Bremner), a schizophrenic who lives with his pregnant sister Pearl (Chloe Sevigny), his teen-aged brother Chris (Evan Neumann), his grandmother (Joyce Korine, Harmony's actual grandmother) and his deranged and abusive father (Werner Herzog) in a house in Queens.

At the start of the film, Julien is seen in a forest mumbling and excited about a bunch of turtles playing in the mud. A young boy is also present, whom Julien strangely attacks and murders, though the camera angle is from the side, blocked by mud and branches, so it is hard to understand what exactly happened.

It quickly becomes apparent that Julien is not of sound mind, but in his home he is surrounded by people who are

almost equally unbalanced.

Random scenes show his pregnant sister ballet dancing, while his brother Chris repeatedly climbs the stairs with his arms, training to be a high school wrestler, and his father dances to the blues wearing a gas-mask and drinking Robotussin.

The entire film carries with it this sad and macabre tone and offers no narrative voice, neither actual narration nor plot direction. This in turn creates a wandering surveillance-video type of feel, as though the outside world is randomly looking in on this very real and very traumatized family.

Much of this has to do with the fact that "Julien Donkey-Boy" is a Dogme 95 certified film. Dogme 95, which was founded by Danish directors Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, is a self-proclaimed cinematic rescue group. The group's manifesto, which was presented at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998, claims that technological innovation has given rise to a corrupt cinematic climate, and the group created a strict set of rules for filmmakers to follow.

These rules allow for only hand-held cameras and location shooting and outlaw production design, soundtrack scores, optical work and genre story lines.

Because of Korine's dedication to realism and the guidelines of Dogme 95's manifesto, the entire film was shot on location in Queens, Yonkers, Harlem and New Jersey, and much of the action takes place in actual environments, such as a children's clothing store, a church confessional, a public bus and even a New Jersey Baptist church, which allowed for the cast and crew to invade and film their actual service.

Korine even went one step further by omitting set dialogue and playing the music used in the film live while the actors were shooting. It was definitely an unprecedented approach to filmmaking and a unique approach to story telling, relying more heavily on camera placement than dialogue. It was also an approach that worked very well.

The combination of Korine's jarring cinematography and the sad and psychotic subject matter of "Julien Donkey-Boy" together create a film that is not easy for viewers to watch.

Korine pulls no punches, switching from random shots of a masturbating nun to scenes in which Julien's father berates his almost completely naked son Chris, spraying him with cold water in the middle of the street and later offering Chris \$10 to dress as his late mother and dance with him.

Images like these are hard to ingest, regardless of cinematic artistry, but because Korine's method is so effective, it makes those scenes doubly sad and freakish.

REVIEW Julien Donkey-Boy

STARRING: Ewen Bremner, Werner Herzog, Chloe Sevigny
DIRECTOR: Harmony Korine
RATING: R (language, sexual themes)
GRADE: B+
FIVE WORDS: Disturbing, chaotic, yet effective film.