

Sects and the city

By Joshua Tanzer

offoffoff.com - May 31, 2008

"The Collective" is a beautifully shot but inadequately conceived movie about a menacing secret society that we can probably rest assured doesn't really exist in the dark heart of New York.



"The Collective" tiptoes up to the line that separates a fully realized work from merely a project, and never quite gets across it.

It's a movie about a secret, possibly very sinister cabal of young religious fanatics in New York. A woman named Tyler flies to New York from — I don't know, somewhere in middle America that's not a "cesspool" like New York — after getting a frantic call from her sister. When she gets there, the sister, Jessica, has vanished from her home and her job, and the mystery is on.

Tyler doesn't have to dig much on her own before "The Collective" comes to her. Jessica didn't mean to call for help, one operative tells her. "She just wants you to know she's okay and you can go home," the woman says. "She has us now."

But surprise — Tyler isn't convinced by that, and she keeps searching.



So here's the first problem:

The terrifying secret society that she finds seems to be nothing but four or five members of the same acting class. In fact, the only living people in all of New York City seem to be attractive, fresh-looking, 29-ish, middle-American actors. Most of them do a perfectly able job in their roles individually, but taken together, they don't feel like the real world. They definitely don't feel like a dangerous cabal. They feel like a club.

Second problem:

The club has no layers. Our heroine, Tyler, isn't challenged to burrow deeper into its secrets before finally uncovering something extraordinary. On the contrary, her challenge is simply to get her sister and leave.

Okay, there is a dark secret in there somewhere — somebody in the club died, for reasons that remain a little inscrutable. But this is a crisis of circumstance, not a crisis of the soul. The script simply wasn't written to explore the soul.

Married writer-directors Judson Pearce Morgan and Kelly Overton (who is also the lead actress) just didn't take their script far enough. The movie has a few good moments in it, but it lacks believability and high stakes. It is short on thought. It takes place in isolation, lacking meaningful interaction between the characters and anybody outside conspiracy-land. Even Tyler lacks a counterpoint character who can share her journey, bring out her thoughts, or offer any wisdom. Tyler moves forward rather calmly, and if she experiences fear, desperation or determination, it never gets on screen. As a result, the movie's emotional level remains subdued and it falls short as a thriller.



The movie's most redeeming feature is that it's well crafted from a technical point of view. Director/cinematographer Morgan, who has been primarily an actor up to now, has done a fantastic job behind the camera. The light and colors are simply beautiful. It would be a pleasure to see more of his work — especially making other people's scripts or shooting other people's movies for a while.

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