

Screen, Screen Reviews

LFF 2019 Review: Knives Out

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes finds Rian Johnson's mystery to be a satisfying, devious joy.

5 mins read

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Early on in Rian Johnson's whodunit *Knives Out*, a character refers to the central family mansion as a 'living Clue board', a description that aptly encapsulates its gleefully intertextual spirit. A murder-mystery that owes as much to Rian's Twitter backlash as it does to the classics of Agatha Christie's bibliography, this modern sleuther is a meticulously written and hugely satisfying production. In keeping with the tabletop allegory, every beat has the feeling of another piece being deliberately

placed into action, until the entire board has run rampant with enough deception and bickering to wreck any family gathering.

The best-selling crime author Harlan Thrombey has been murdered. Throat slit with the knife itself resting beside his cold body, it's a dramatic postscript to a birthday party that was already teetering on self-destruction. To make matters more fittingly complicated, it appears that every member of the Thrombey family (plus certain extended relatives) was in attendance, and every single one of them has a plausible motive for murder. Cue contradictory testimonies, crime scene investigations, and cigar smoking aplenty.

Benoit Blanc (played ebulliently by Daniel Craig) is anonymously assigned to investigate the Thrombey family, labeled amusingly as the 'last of the gentleman sleuths'. For whilst Blanc's appearance and conduct are certainly evocative of the golden age of detective fiction, his world is alienating. Instead of butlers and landlords, we have neo-liberals and alt-right Twitter trolls taking up the occupation, sometimes causing as much strife as the murderer hidden amongst the lot. That's why the circle of knives proudly on display in the Thrombey mansion is so initially disarming; here is something antique and delicate mingling with its otherwise modern residents. Yet, as Johnson slyly makes clear as the film progresses, that circle visualises an idea that proves powerfully timely – it doesn't take much nowadays to feel surrounded by faceless attackers willing to cut deep.

Knives Out is full of those moments – reveals and lines that make you want to cheer and clap coupled with a suitable dopamine rush as everything falls together in its exemplary denouement

There's hardly a lack of potential attackers either. *Knives Out* assembles an almighty ensemble cast and to great relief, utilises them unanimously to their fullest extent. Not one player here is weak although there are certainly the standouts – Ana de Armas is excellent as Harlan's nurse, Toni Collette is on top comic form as a self-absorbed skincare entrepreneur and Chris Evans is delightfully offbeat as the family's bad-mouthed black sheep. The first act toys with the straightforward notion of character introductions wonderfully, as each individual testimony not only sheds light on the incident itself, but on the narrator's respective personality

and perspective of events, often revealing more information than their explicit words.

It's difficult to imagine the skill involved in this mammoth casting feat, since the Thrombey family all have friction with one another, exchanging accusations and wry insults that are a wonderful source of entertainment. This is a film that is intentionally written as homage, and so never takes itself too seriously, yet still manages to create stakes and intrigue that feel earned rather than hollow parody. By its final smug twist in the tale, *Knives Out* establishes a cast of characters and a world all of its own, divorced from the pages and reels it was initially so clearly inspired from.

Furthermore, it's a film exploding with vibrancy and dynamism thanks to another ace cinematographic turn from Johnson's frequent collaborator Steve Yedlin. There's an abundance of clever visual motifs that harken back to mystery classics as well as some grin-inducing sight gags. Yedlin's composition in the final shot cements it as one of my favourite stills of the year, a truly thunderous concluding image that demands a standing ovation all of its own. *Knives Out* is full of those moments – reveals and lines that make you want to cheer and clap coupled with a suitable dopamine rush as everything falls together in its exemplary denouement. There's no mystery here; *Knives Out* is one of the year's best films.

We give it

4.5



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