

Screen, Screen Reviews

Sundance 2019 – The Death of Dick Long – Review

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes is equally bewildered and entertained by Daniel Scheinert's latest black comedy.

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Written by [& Jacob Heayes](#) | Jun 14, 2019

Much like its provocatively frank title, there's something beautifully minimalist about Daniel Scheinert's black comedy *The Death of Dick Long*. Moving on from the fantastically eccentric *Swiss Army Man* (co-directed with Dan Kwan), Scheinert and screenwriter Billy Chew have crafted a similarly surprising albeit more grounded tale set in a textured interpretation of present-day Alabama. A nasty story painted with an unexpectedly humanist touch, *The Death of Dick Long* is absolutely an original cult gem waiting to be found.

The premise is as simple as one could hope for – Dick is dead and his band-mates Zeke and Earl don't want a soul finding out how. Wasting no time in establishing its setup, *Dick Long* is instantly reminiscent of classic Coen Brothers material, not only in its heightened location but in its narrative laden with mix-ups and dirty crimes gone awry. To anyone well-versed in the pathetic perpetrators of *Fargo*, the awkward dialogue and kooky police officers will make these audiences feel particularly comfortable. Scheinert's depiction of small-town Alabama is inflected with several gorgeous touches: burning campfires, rustic housing and its unorthodox residents. Cinematographer Ashley Connor creates a distinctive, grainy aesthetic evocative of grimy punk music videos that immediately proves eye-catching. No matter how wild the tonal shifts are, the film's cosy homeliness

constantly grounds the viewer in the notion that this remains a low-key human story at its heart.

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Michael Abbott Jr. and Andre Hyland both give extraordinarily memorable performances as the film's leads, carrying the burden of their guilt with hilarious foolishness. Zeke and Earl are certainly amalgamations of extreme Deep South quirks and initially appear to function as mere caricatures for the film to make a surface-level statement on their ignorance. Thankfully, the narrative progresses into darker territory and in a cleverly self-reflexive move, the film interrogates these perceptions and challenges the audience to sympathise with these shockingly immoral characters. Abbott Jr. in particular deserves praise as he carries much of the emotional heavy lifting as the film nauseatingly moves to its conclusion. Much of *Dick Long*'s achievement rests in its bravery to execute a horrific narrative upheaval deliberately straight-faced, and indeed, this is where even reviewing the film becomes a Herculean feat of self-restraint. Needless to say, its commitment to absurd drama in its final act will inevitably divide and disgust mainstream audiences, yet will almost certainly entrench it within cult viewers seeking the best of taboo tales.

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Having said that, Chew's script is otherwise frequently hilarious in how it plays with its pastiche of Alabama values and interpersonal relationships. Hyland's bumbling Earl is a joyous on-screen presence, his body language and constant stutters alone radiating more personality than whole characters. Even when the viewer is in the dark on *why* they're so desperate to bury Dick's death, their futile plight is never anything short of wildly entertaining. As minimalist the film is in effectively founding its humour on one elaborate joke, its self-confidence and near masterful execution is impressive and continuously mines comedy gold scene-by-scene. The obvious police investigation sub-plot even feels refreshing thanks to wonderfully subdued performances by Sarah Baker and Janelle Cochrane. Whilst their scenes can initially feel too separated and derivative, Chew smartly ties together these distinct threads in amusing fashion.

For as small in scale *The Death of Dick Long* proves to be, it's undeniably impressive quite how memorable and caustic the final result is. No matter how familiar the first acts are, it quickly shatters all preconceptions that this is merely another addition in a genre saturated by indie filmmakers. Instead, *The Death of*

Dick Long is bracingly original, a film so unapologetic that you can't help but admire it.

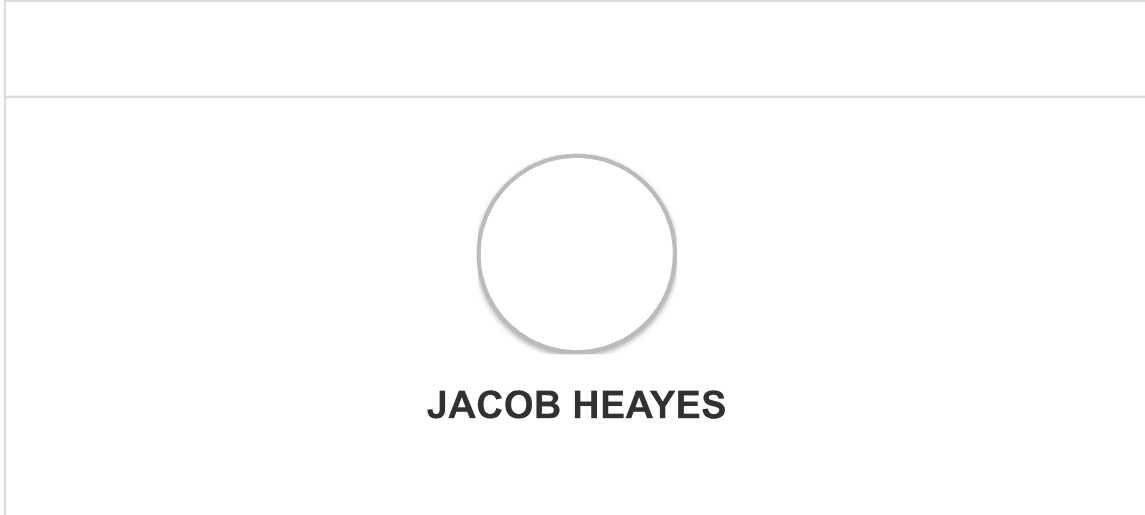
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