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TIFF13 Review: Devil's Knot (2013)

Posted by Sean Fitzpatrick August 30, 2013 0 Comment 3218 views

Back in 1993, three eight-year-old boys, Steve Branch, Michael Moore, and Christopher Byers, were found brutally murdered in West Memphis, Arkansas. The crime, which was widely considered to be the work of a satanic cult, stirred West Memphis' police officers and civilians, as well as numerous national media outlets, into a hysteria that eventually led to the wrongful capture of Damian Echols, Jessie Misskelley, and Jason Baldwin – all teenagers, all social outcasts. The ensuing trial and conviction of Echols, Misskelley and Baldwin – A.K.A. the West Memphis Three – remains one of the strangest and most tragic miscarriages of justice in the history of American law.

Fortunately for the West Memphis Three, their unlucky circumstances became famous through the work of documentary filmmakers Bruce Sinofsky and Joe Berlinger. The two filmmakers documented the entire trial and appeal process of the West Memphis Three in their riveting, enlightening, and galvanizing *Paradise Lost* trilogy. For those who have neither seen the *Paradise Lost* trilogy nor heard tell of any in-depth analyses about the West Memphis Three's trial and incarceration, Canadian auteur Atom Egoyan has prepared a new feature film, *Devil's Knot*, which screens at this year's Toronto International Film Festival. Unlike the *Paradise Lost* documentaries, which focus on the media hysteria surrounding the trial, *Devil's Knot* dramatizes its tragic events by turning them into a vexing mixture of domestic melodrama, murder mystery, and courtroom drama.

Being the director of both *Exotica* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, Egoyan is no stranger to telling compelling and tragic stories recounting the toll that the deaths of children take on small communities. Egoyan's expertise with handling such touchy subject matter makes his clumsy treatment of *Devil's Knot's* narrative all the more frustrating. The film spreads its plot way too thin, jarringly teeter-tottering between powerful domestic scenes of grieving parents and sweeping courtroom scenes that contain far less potency.

Devil's Knot is a star-studded affair, complete with decent performances from Colin Firth and Reese

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Witherspoon, as well as Canadian vets Elias Koteas, Bruce Greenwood, and Kevin Durand. There's no scenery chewing, the actors remain respectful to the real-life tragedy they're depicting, but none of the performances stand out as particularly engrossing.

The film's final ten minutes contain several speeches concerning the nature of truth and the reasons for evil's existence in the world. These speeches cheapen the preceding events of *Devil's Knot's* narrative, tacking a condescending moral onto the end of a film whose onscreen story should have made it plain that the West Memphis Three's conviction was entirely misguided and wrongful, thanks to careless police officers, hysterical townsfolk, and gullible reportage. The *Paradise Lost* films never even resort to voice-over commentary, which singly reveals the vast differences in emotional power between Berlinger and Sinofsky's documentaries and Egoyan's drama. In a way, this final speechifying shows how carelessly Egoyan assembled the pieces of a real-life puzzle. *Devil's Knot* shows that, when a real-life story is this complex and riveting, watch the real thing.

Screening Times for Devil's Knot

Sunday September 8 Visa Screening Room (Elgin) 9:00 PM

Monday September 9 TIFF Bell Lightbox 1 9:00 AM

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ATOM EGOYAN DEVIL'S KNOT FESTIVAL COVERAGE TIFF13

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About Sean Fitzpatrick



Freelance film critic and avid fan of music, books, and movies. Learned the mercantile trade from my father and uncle, Niccolo and Maffeo, and met Kublai Khan.

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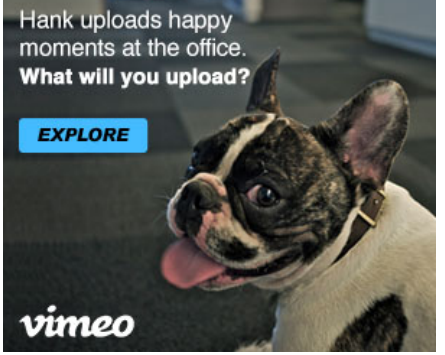


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