



Vin Diesel in *Find Me Guilty*

VISINE ALERT

Find Me Guilty; Sorry, Haters; Threat; Independant America; Rain in a Dry Land; Basic Instinct 2

reviews by M. Faust

Attention, film fans: The gods of cinema distribution want you to know that they are really, really sorry about last week, when the multiplexes were bombarded with *Larry the Cable Guy* and *Stay Alive*. In their defense they did give you *Inside Man*. Still, they recognize that *Larry* demands a lot of apologizing, so they're making it up to you this week with more worthwhile movies than you can shake a stick at.

Most of these films are playing at non-multiplex venues (including *Culloden* and *Chain*, reviewed separately in this issue). And even the best mainstream offering of the week has a quasi-indie aspect: Though it was directed by one of Hollywood's finest, Sidney Lumet, and stars action hero Vin Diesel, *Find Me Guilty* is being handled by a small distributor and will be showing only at two suburban theaters. (A lot of smaller cities aren't getting to see it at all.)

It's worth the trip to the 'burbs. Lumet may be past 80, but this film, his first since 1999, bears comparison to some of his best, including *12 Angry Men*, *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Prince of the City*. *Find Me Guilty* is based on the federal criminal trial of New Jersey's Lucchese crime family, an enormous undertaking that lasted a record 21 months in 1986-87. The government had spent years preparing it and was determined to convict all of the 20 defendants.

The film's point of view is that of Giacomo "Jackie Dee" DiNorscio, a mid-level wiseguy already in prison at the start of the trial. Disgusted by what he sees as the uselessness of lawyers who want him to accept a plea deal to rat out his life-

long friends, Jackie decides to defend himself. A high school dropout with an ingratiating sense of humor, he figures he can sway the jury without too much trouble. But there are plenty of pitfalls he hasn't foreseen, including the prosecutor's ability to make his prison life difficult, the judge's impatience with his disruptive antics and his co-defendants, who are afraid he'll undo the strategies of their high-priced lawyers.

I've always had a special fondness for courtroom movies, and this one gets at all the elements that make the genre so intriguing: the artificiality of the behavior, the search for truth in such a constricted environment, the essential dignity of people submitting to such a system as a tool for something so ephemeral as justice.

Yes, I hear you saying, "...but...Vin Diesel?" Okay, I'll admit that he may not be the next Olivier, and there are times when you can see Lumet working with him to get past some taxing moments. But he's perfectly cast (having put on weight and hair for the part) and provides exactly what the role calls for: a scary guy who knows when to turn it on and off, with a naivete that is as touching as it is unlikely.

Like many mob stories, *Find Me Guilty* has one nagging fault: it fails to give us an excuse to root for the bad guys. Fans of the genre will know in advance how the trial ended and, given the shape of the story, it's inevitable that we'll root for Jackie. But it wasn't inevitable that the prosecuting attorney be played (by Linus Roache) as such a dislikeable power freak. Even when he explodes in an-



Robin Wright Penn in *Sorry, Haters*



Keith "wild child" Middleton in *Threat*

ger over exactly this issue, that the jury is refusing to recognize what evil scum the defendants are, the effect of the scene is to make us dislike him. Lumet seems to be encouraging this rather than using it for ironic effect; as a director who has so often told stories about criminals, his defense of the issue would be interesting to hear.

Liking the bad guys is a whole different issue in *Sorry, Haters*, a film that had many viewers at last year's Toronto Film Festival frothing at the mouth. It will be playing for one day only next Wednesday at the Emerging Cinema screen at the Market Arcade, and if you enjoy a lively discussion, by all means take a few friends to see it.

If that sounds like a backhanded compliment, so be it. Described by director Jeff Stanzler (*Jumpin' at the Boneyard*) as "a psychological thriller with political and social undertones set in today's New York City," *Sorry, Haters* involves two characters, a professional woman who calls herself Philly (Robin Penn Wright) and a Muslim cabdriver named Ashade (Tunisian actor-director Abdellatif Kechiche). An émigré from Syria, where he held a Ph.D. in chemistry, Ashade is desperately trying to save his brother, who has been sent to Guantanamo on trumped-up charges and faces deportation back to Syria, where he will probably be tortured and executed. Learning of this, Philly offers to use her

connections to help, an offer Ashade gratefully accepts, despite some rather peculiar behavior on her part.

That's as much as I can say about a film which kept me guessing from beginning to end. Working in low-budget digital video on a short schedule gave Stanzler the ability to shoot a story that no studio would ever have financed; according to Roger Ebert, even Stanzler's producers tried to get him to alter the film. The movie shocked me, perhaps gratuitously, perhaps not, I haven't decided. Make up your own mind, and if nothing else be grateful for the chance to see something so risky.

Threat, which plays on Friday, Saturday and Tuesday at the Screening Room in Amherst, has been widely anticipated by a reported 25,000 people who have been following its progress on the Internet. When NYU dropouts Katie Nisa and Matt Pizzolo decided to make a film about the nihilism of their generation, they dealt with a lack of resources and experience by turning to the net for help and advice. Their project helped them develop a crew of 200 volunteers who worked on the film, none of them older than Pizzolo (who was barely 22 when filming began).

It's terrific that this collective, dubbed Kings Mob, had the patience and the drive to conceive of this film and to get it made under difficult circumstances.



Madina Ali Yunye in *Rain in a Dry Land*

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