

Pig: An outsider searches for his four-legged companion

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Written and directed by Michael Sarnoski

Michael Sarnoski's *Pig* is a generally sensitive, humane film. It examines the human experience of grief and loss without, for the most part, succumbing to sentimentality or histrionics. It is not earth-shattering, but it is well acted, intelligently written and visually appealing.

Robin Feld (Nicolas Cage) is a once-renowned chef now living in a tiny cabin in the woods outside Portland, Oregon. His only companion is his truffle pig (that is, an animal trained to find the rare, expensive truffle fungus, a culinary delicacy). His sole source of human interaction is with Amir (Alex Wolff), a brash, superficial young man who purchases the truffles in order to sell them to high-end restaurants.

One night, Robin is attacked by unseen assailants who steal his pig. Deprived of his only companion, Robin is compelled to return to the world of civilization to find and recover the animal. He enlists Amir's help, who reluctantly drives the disheveled Robin around the streets of Portland, hunting for leads as to the pig's whereabouts.

Their odyssey takes them to a number of locations each of which paints the city in an unflattering light: a brutal underground fighting ring for restaurant workers, where Robin allows himself to be beaten savagely without raising a hand in defense; a trendy and ostentatious upscale restaurant run by one of Robin's former prep cooks (Robin: "I fired you because you always overcooked the pasta."); and ultimately to a confrontation with Amir's father Darius (Adam Arkin), a wealthy restaurant magnate whose domineering nature has led him to sabotage his own son's enterprise. Along the way, Robin and Amir bond over their shared experiences of loss: Robin's beloved wife had died years earlier, an event which precipitated his

retreat from society, while Amir's mother had resorted to suicide to escape her personal demons.

In the end, Robin's plan to rescue his pig involves not an act of retribution against Darius, but an act of compassion. The film's final scenes lead the characters to painful, yet cathartic conclusions.

There are appealing elements to *Pig*. Its sympathies are generally in the right place, on the side of the wounded, the outsiders, those battered and bruised by life. It is mistrustful (if not exactly hostile) toward wealth and power. One feels that first-time writer-director Sarnoski, like his protagonist, sees himself as being at odds with much of contemporary culture.

The Robin-Cage character, with his shaggy, unkempt appearance, monkish demeanor and almost Christ-like propensity for turning the other cheek to his enemies, veers occasionally into the absurd. But when pitted against characters representing the money-mad and venal milieu of the upscale restaurant industry, he becomes an effective foil. Robin's very appearance inside a trendy restaurant or next to Amir's flashy sports car renders them ridiculous.

Robin's aforementioned confrontation with the head chef of a pompous "deconstructed food" restaurant is the film's most memorable scene. Robin reminds the chef that he had once dreamed of opening an English-style pub, which the chef had abandoned after deciding it would be "a terrible investment." As the chef begins to break down at the memory of his former dream, Robin remarks, "They're not real. You get that, right? None of it is real. The critics aren't real. The customers aren't real... Why do you care about these people? They don't care about you, none of them. You live your life for them, and they don't even see you. You don't even see yourself."

He adds, "We don't get a lot of things to really care

about.”

Under Sarnoski’s direction, Cage gives a moving, understated performance, a welcome change from the over-the-top mania that characterizes too many of his roles, particularly those in a series of empty, pointless “action” films. Arkin is effective as a would-be tyrant with a painful history. Wolff is quite good as Amir, whose obsession with status and appearances masks deep insecurity.

Pig’s merits are relatively modest, however, and its drawbacks prevent the film from being as satisfying as it might have been. One could say that the meal here is pleasant, but not filling. While Sarnoski attempts to identify certain corrosive or dehumanizing features of contemporary life, his appraisal doesn’t get much beyond the surface of things. The film seems to be saying that humans are in conflict with each other mainly because we are afraid of “opening up” and becoming emotionally vulnerable. While well intentioned, this sort of therapy-session outlook can only get one so far.

The pessimism generally underlying such a perspective comes through in a speech Robin gives to Amir: “We don’t have to care...Every 200 years we get an earthquake right along the coast. One’s coming up. When the shockwave hits, most of the city will flatten...Five minutes later, they’ll look up, and they’ll see a wave 10 stories high. And then all of this, everyone, it’s all going to be at the bottom of the ocean again.” What is one to do in the face of such “inevitable” calamity? Robin’s solution, and the only one Sarnoski is capable of imagining at present, is to escape into the woods.

Certain scenes hint at deeper social realities. The underground fight pit, where restaurant workers beat up desperate individuals for money, is particularly disturbing. Sarnoski was apparently inspired to include this scene after discussions with restaurant workers who would sometimes hit punching bags in response to the stress, abuse and mistreatment they experience during their shifts.

Yet, the intense exploitation of restaurant industry workers isn’t truly felt in this scene, or anywhere else in the film. Such workers face a reality of low wages, long hours, miserable working conditions and social instability. Mental illness and drug abuse are rampant. These hardships have been exacerbated by the

pandemic, which has placed many small restaurants under immense financial pressure, and which has turned kitchens and dining areas into potential death traps.

Pig has little to say about these social realities, and the film’s depiction of the restaurant industry remains somewhat half-baked as a result.

But despite its shortcomings, the film leaves a more or less good impression. One’s time is not wasted by it. In the current cultural landscape, dominated by stupidity, cruelty and anti-social violence, such a statement can still be considered praise.



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