



FILM REVIEW

The Man Who Knew Too Much

Altered Minds DVD Review

November 2016

Released on DVD in June 2016, *Altered Minds* is the much-lauded psychological thriller from Generation X auteur Michael Z. Wechsler, whose 1999 comedy, *Slaves of Hollywood*, was a sly insider's view of the bottom rung of the film industry, an absurdist *Swingers*. Mr. Wechsler took a decade to bring us *Altered Minds* (originally titled *Red Robin*) and, given the craftsmanship on display in the film, it's obvious why it took Mr. Wechsler, who wrote, directed and produced *Altered Minds*, so long to bring us such a dark, troubling and carefully-made film. *Slaves of Hollywood* was a lot of fun, a "piss-take," as the Brits say. To describe *Altered Minds* as Lord Alfred Tennyson might have, here "gloom the dark, broad seas." The film is a great leap forward for Mr. Wechsler and an award-winner: after its world premiere at the Montreal Film Festival, *Altered Minds* won a Jury Award for Excellence in Filmmaking at the 2014 Gasparilla International Film Festival and awards for Best Screenplay and Best Cinematography at the Oaxaca Film Festival. It was also an Official Selection at more than 20 festivals worldwide, including Glasgow International Film Festival, Fantasporto Film Festival, Palm Beach International Film Festival and Woodstock Film Festival. We may have found ourselves, luckily, in the midst of Mr. Wechsler's great leap forward.

Dr. Nathan Shellner, as played at perfect pitch by underrated American treasure Judd Hirsch, is the paterfamilias of the Shellner family, longtime residents of a leafy, sleepy enclave in suburban Philadelphia. Dr. Shellner is a loving husband and father and a renowned psychiatrist, the founder of a clinic, and a treatment method, for American veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, a physician described by LBJ as "a true American patriot." From this coruscation we wade into the darkness (and yes, read on, what I'm about to tell you certainly shades the film, but your knowledge of it won't minimize the suspense Mr. Wechsler has in store for you): Dr. Shellner was also part of a group of doctors who, for reasons best described in our current parlance as "homeland security," performed mind-control experiments on some of the veterans in their care.

Welcome to American cinema (and television) after Abu Graihb. Torture, once a rarity in most films and shows - or played for laughs, as in the Pit of Despair in *The Princess Bride* - is a dominant theme, from 24 to the remake of *Casino Royale* (2006), in which arch villain Le Chiffre, played by Mads Mikkelsen, chains Daniel Craig's 007 (already battered and stripped naked) to a chair and whips his testicles again and again with a thick rope. We have eaten a

bitter apple, and its aroma and taste have suffused much of our film culture (*Deadpool* (2016), anyone?). Of course, the justification for what we did at Abu Ghraib, at our “black sites” and at Guantanamo is the capture of intelligence crucial to the defeat of an amorphous, sinister enemy with immense resources and no fixed address, one who, should it achieve its objectives, will take delight in the utter destruction of the world. We are told this intelligence will save American lives, French lives, British lives, Spanish lives, Turkish lives...and thus we must procure it by “any means necessary,” even if those means include beatings, sleep deprivation, stress positions beyond what the average human being can handle, waterboarding...even if they are immoral (to say nothing of illegal).

What decisions did Shellner make when he permitted the use of his patients as guinea pigs? How did a loving father and a patriot come to participate in the torture of his own countrymen, all for the sake of perfecting torture to be used against whomever our current enemy might be? So *Altered Minds*, in the person of Dr. Nathan Shellner, asks the question we have been forced to ask ourselves since the discovery of what was done to Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib: what wrongs are we willing to essay, what sins are we willing to commit, for a greater good and what is that good? If we are each charged with creating our own moral universe with a set of fixed thresholds, thresholds that define who each of us is at the core of his or her being, what makes it possible for us to cross them? Once? Repeatedly? And, regardless of the crimes we may commit against others during travels we swore we’d never embark upon, who are we once we’ve done so? Every performance in this terrific ensemble piece is carefully measured and pitch-perfect, and none more so than Hirsch’s. Dr. Shellner is a loving, empathetic father and husband and a brilliant psychiatrist, and Hirsch gives him a palpable dignity and a bookish elegance, such that we understand Shellner’s “villainy”, if we can use such a term, was forced upon him. Twice. So *Altered Minds* is a post-Iraq film because within its narrative torture is a tool and our boundaries, familial and personal in the film and international beyond it, are insecure.

Dr. Shellner has been stricken with lung cancer, and *Altered Minds* opens on the evening of what may be Dr. Shellner’s last birthday party. The cast of characters includes Dr. Shellner’s wife, Lillian (Caroline Lagerfelt); the Shellner’s one biological child, Leonard (Joseph Lyle Taylor), a psychiatrist who has now runs Dr. Shellner’s clinic; Tommy (Ryan O’Nan), a horror writer and Julie (Jaime Ray Newman), a photographer, adopted as siblings by the Shellners, and Harry (C.S. Lee), a concert violinist adopted by the Shellners from Vietnam. The Shellners, whatever their faults, are loving parents. Throughout the film we are in the midst of a loving family. Like Almodovar, Mr. Wechsler has a penchant for unique, expressive faces, and much of what’s communicated in *Altered Minds* is done with a shrug or a grimace, with a tear or two but little more, by each member of the film’s outstanding ensemble cast.

All the symbols of family and comfort are present when we arrive at the Shellner household: a blazing fire, a piano, a hearty lunch of brisket and string beans...five or so holiday cards have been affixed to a bulletin board to the left of the kitchen sink, and one reads, in capital letters, “Joy. Noel. Peace.” We’re also greeted by Edmund Choi’s anxious, wintry soundtrack, however, as well as icicles as long and sharp as Crusader swords and faulty household wiring that makes

the lights throughout the house flicker and buzz, devices all used to engender our sense of dread. Mr. Wechsler takes great pains, through his lighting and set design, to create a claustrophobic atmosphere, and there's a feeling of being cramped and constricted that calls to mind Woody Allen's *Interiors* (1978), which was Allen's homage to his beloved Bergman. We are made to understand from the get-go that there will be drink and despair, perhaps even fisticuffs, will ensue. The exterior scenes, all snow and the bare trunks and branches of deciduous trees, might remind you of the scenes in the maze at the Overlook Hotel toward the end of *The Shining* (1980), another painstakingly-crafted claustrophobic thriller. The exterior scenes are lovely and stark, reminiscent of great black and white photographs.

I appreciate Mr. Wechsler's other thoughtful touches, like when Tommy builds a snowman on the front lawn. He lights a bent cigarette with a Zippo lighter, and we hear that familiar click and spark (Mr. Wechsler has given as much thought to what we hear throughout *Altered Minds* as to what we see) – the Zippo then becomes crucial to a discovery made later in the film. Mr. Wechsler has built *Altered Minds* around a very particular set of images, objects and sounds, and he returns to them again and again, consistent but never tendentious. And it's this care and consistency that make watching *Altered Minds* such a satisfying experience.

In a recent review of *Alfred Hitchcock: A Brief Life* by Peter Ackroyd, Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* writes: "More than a century after his birth, Hitchcock remains our contemporary because the world of menace he conjured embodies our deepest, most existential fears. Fears (especially resonant today) that the universe is irrational, that evil lies around the corner, that ordinary life can be ripped apart at any moment by some random unforeseen event..." This is exactly what Mr. Wechsler accomplishes in *Altered Minds*, and it's all done without gore, CGI...things go bump in the night, but nothing explodes, arrives from space, races across an Australian desert in a go-kart made out of human skulls...it's a thriller, yes, but a very old school thriller, the way Hitchcock and Roman Polanski used to make them. The story is jarring, repeatedly, but the film itself, as an artistic endeavor, never strays from what might be construed from its opening scenes as its *raison d'être*, its mission statement. Its winter hues and its soundtrack – which is reminiscent of the sound of winter rain, replete with water dripping from icicles – create a chill, one that never warms, even with the blazing fire in the Shellners' fireplace.

The film belongs to O'Nan, whose Tommy, haunted to the point of terrified, sick to the point of self-destruction, drives the action much the same way Jack O'Connell did with his phenomenal portrayal of Kyle Budwell in Jodie Foster's recent *Money Monster* (2015). We watch *Altered Minds* to find out if Tommy is a boy crying wolf. Wechsler keeps his cards close to his chest, and we trail Tommy throughout the Shellner household and across its front lawn trying to deduce if this is someone with a mental illness or a personality disorder, or if this is someone who has been abused and neglected but has a sinister theory about his childhood and adolescence that travels far beyond this? The madness afflicting Tommy seeps into his siblings and, toward the middle of the film, Harry, seated in front of the fire, admits he can't sleep, that when he dreams he "sees children on fire...I wake up and I feel...like a murderer." What seems to be affecting

Tommy seems to grow systemic within the Shellner household. Harry says, "I don't know. I just need to believe nothing went wrong in this house." And then we wait to find out...

Shellner tells us, "if a man fails his family, he fails life," which harkens back to Don Corleone's sidelong admonishment of Sonny in *The Godfather* (1972), when he says, "...a man who doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man." Mr. Wechsler's love of movies is obvious, and he's done his homework. He uses a number of devices from horror films and thrillers, but he demonstrates how much respect he has for our intelligence by using them sparingly and strategically. He never overplays his hand which, to this viewer, demonstrates the influence of Hitchcock. To be honest, though, Hitchcock seemed to be having far more fun in his thrillers than Mr. Wechsler does here, but I believe this is because Mr. Wechsler is asking us two very troubling questions: How do we survive? And, if we do survive, how do we live?

It's a generous DVD, with a pile of deleted scenes and commentary from the affable Mr. Wechsler, who seems like the kind of gentlemen with whom you'd love to watch a film. The deleted scenes underline how precisely *Altered Minds* was edited – again, without giving anything away, had they been included, *Altered Minds* would have been a wildly different film from the version released in theaters and available on this DVD.

If you're a film lover, this is the perfect stocking stuffer. Unless you're heading home for Christmas.