Lincoln Film Society

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Patron: Jim Broadbent

Friday April 5th 2019

Good Time (15)

dir: **Josh and Benny Safdie**

Starring:: **Robert Pattinson, Benny Safdie, Buddy Duress**

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Synopsis. New York City, the present. Connie drags his developmentally impaired brother Nick out of a therapy session to help him pull off bank robbery. It goes wrong and Nick is arrested and taken to jail, where he's assaulted. Connie escapes and decides to rescue him. He abducts him from hospital, only to find it isn't Nick but Ray, who's on parole. The two of them set off with Crystal, a 16 year old girl, to get hold of some drugs Ray has hidden in an amusement arcade (Connie's plan being to sell the drugs to raise bail cash). They attack the security guard. Crystal is arrested while Ray and Connie go to the guard's apartment where they argue. The police arrive. Ray tries to escape by climbing through the window. Connie is taken into custody.

Of all the youngish, critically buoyed New York filmmakers to emerge over the past decade, Josh and Benny Safdie are at once the craftiest and the most reckless. They like to get away with things (cf the borderline alarming production circumstances of their 2014 junkie drama *Heaven Knows What*), and their movies are about characters who are similarly driven.

In *Good Time,* Robert Pattinson plays Connie, a low-level hood defined, for better and mostly for worse, by his belief that he can wriggle out of any situation if he gives it a couple of minutes thought. As a confidence man, he's his own best customer. The queasy, compulsive excitement of the film lies in watching somebody who's not quite as smart as he thinks he is living by his wits - and by the skin of his teeth.

Connie's status as a disruptive force is established and cemented in the very first scene, where he bursts into a therapy session between his developmentally disabled younger brother Nick (played by co-director Benny) and a social worker. Not only does Connie's intrusion cut off the dialogue between Nick and his caregiver when it seems on the verge of a breakthrough, it also opens the stable, shot-reverse-shot camera work describing their exchange. His arrival doesn't just end the session; it rewrites the film's language. Connie is an emissary of the sprawling New York phantasmagoria that lies beyond the office walls, and *Good Time*'s breakneck pace and nervy, uneven rhythms - in terms of camera movement, cutting and the throbbing electronic score by Oneohtrix - are tethered to the actions of its central chaos agent.

Pattinson is tremendous here, achieving a different sort of self-effacement than in his noble supporting role in last year's *The Lost City of Z*. Once again, the performance works as a disappearing act, though the point is less that an attractive movie star has believably disguised himself as a low-level hustler than that

he's hit upon subterfuge as a motif for the character. Connie operates at all times under a fog of task-oriented paranoia. The master stroke of the script (co-written by Josh with Ronald Bronstein, who also worked on the editing) is how it takes a situation that, in almost any other film of this type, would be played for pathos - Connie's desperate attempt to retrieve a confused Nick from police custody after the latter is arrested following a botched heist - and instead strip-mines it for every last iota of moral ambiguity. Brotherly love isn't a higher calling here; it's a trap that closes in on both siblings in different ways.

Nick's incarceration essentially takes him out of the narrative, stranding Connie with what little is left of the stick-up money and stranding us with Connie, who has to rank as one of the most defiantly unlikeable protagonists in recent American cinema. What makes *Good Time* a slightly flummoxing viewing experience is the way the Safdies illustrate this point without insisting on it. Their style is observational, not rhetorical, and the inherent refusal to impose judgement on Connie's actions, which quickly devolve from merely manipulative (convincing his older girlfriend, played by Jennifer Jason Leigh, to max out her credit cards to pay Nick's bail) to truly outrageous (kidnapping an unconscious, badly injured patient from a critical-care ward) coupled with the dynamism of their presentation, creates a certain spaciousness for audience reaction. In the absence of overt ethical annotation, this supremely assured movie becomes a difficult and slippery object; one viewer's enervating nightmare could very well be another another's good time.

So would *Good Time* be improved if it were made clearer that Connie, and his habit of predatorily exploiting the people around him - particularly and most egregiously a series of African American characters victimized in different ways along the trajectory of his rescue operation - was a 'bad' person? I'd say no, and not only because there are too few American movies that countenance such ambiguity. Connie maybe unlikeable, but he's not necessarily unrelatable; the sequence of deep, rocky gaps between his intentions, his actions and their consequences truer to life (even to lives far removed from this specific milieu) than any number of more carefully finessed anti-heroes. And the sheer multiplicity of ways the Safdies find to comment on the action visually - shooting an extended set piece in a deserted amusement park beneath a mix of neon and black light, or elevating their camera to a despairing bird's-eye view at a fateful decisive point - all but demolishes accusations of glib irresponsibility. Connie is a hopeless case. But his creators know exactly what they're doing.

Another View

There's a scene in Benny and Josh Safdie's 2014 feature, *Heaven Knows What,* where junkie protagonist Harley (Arielle Holmes) is shown watching one of the Hellraiser sequels on TV while high. It's a fleeting moment of escapism from the real-world horrorshow she is living, a brief intermission in an otherwise unrelentingly bleak study of addiction.

Respite is even less forthcoming in the Safdies' electrifying, similarly downbeat follow-up, *Good Time*. In it, Robert Pattinson plays a petty crook who scrambles to post bail for his mentally disabled brother (played by Benny Safdie) following a comically sloppy bank job. The word 'comically' applies here in the loosest, most darkly ironic sense, because while there is an element of farce about the heist itself, the consequences for both men are grave.

The setting is present-day New York City, yet the film's ultra-gritty, gutter-level milieu instantly recalls the past masters of Gotham pulp: Abel Ferrara, Paul Schrader and Martin Scorsese. The Safdies were raised in Queens and Manhattan, and they populate their film with precisely the kind of scum which the city's most famous fictional anti-hero, Travis Bickle, so aggressively stood up against.

Pattinson's Connie Nikas might be the filthiest of the lot – a deeply troubled, dangerously impetuous blue-collar criminal who appears to have snapped the needle off his moral compass and stuck it into his arm. The role was written specifically for Pattinson after he reached out to the Safdies expressing a strong desire to work with them, and it's clear he relished the opportunity to put himself through the ringer, imbuing Connie with a tragic sense of despair while channelling the bug-eyed intensity of Al Pacino in his pomp.

That said, for all that Pattinson is a fine actor capable of shedding his celebrity skin for a down-and-dirty picture such as this, the idea of casting a bona fide Hollywood A-lister seems directly at odds with the Safdies' fiercely independent style. With the exception of Caleb Landry Jones in *Heaven Knows What,* the directors generally use non-professional actors in their films, often basing their scripts on the real-life experiences of people they meet (two years before she made her acting debut in *Heaven Knows What,* Arielle Holmes was a homeless heroin addict). Given that their next project, *Uncut Gems*, stars Jonah Hill in the lead role, it will be interesting to find out how much longer they can continue operating within their preferred filmmaking mode.

On the other hand, it's great to see two supremely talented filmmakers finally receive the wider recognition they deserve. Not just because their work is formally audacious but because it is so unflinchingly, thrillingly true to life. Where so many young filmmakers have a tendency to wear their progressive politics on their sleeve, the Safdies address everyday social injustice in more subtle and telling ways. In one scene Connie, at his most desperate and violent ebb, breaks into an amusement park after hours in search of a soda bottle filled with LSD, and the resulting skirmish with the on-duty security guard leads to a racial profiling incident that is shocking in its normalcy.

Much of *Good Time* was filmed at night, and cinematographer Sean Price Williams' decision to shoot on 35mm with a widescreen aspect ratio punches the film's naturalistic aesthetic up several notches. Added to this, the combination of hand-held camerawork, harsh artificial lighting and an erratic grunge-synth score by Brooklyn-based electronic musician Daniel Lopatin (aka Oneohtrix Point Never) lends a heart-pounding fever dream quality to this nightmarish vision of urban decay. Yet the film never feels like anything less than an authentic trip through the brothers' backyard. It's hardcore stuff, and proof that American cinema's best kept secret is well and truly out.

Adam Woodward: Little White Lies

This season's classic film is regularly listed as one of the greatest films ever made, and no wonder. As the BFI's website puts it, "This white-knuckle masterpiece wrings every last drop of tension from its ingeniously simple premise, as four men take on a potentially suicidal assignment – driving trucks loaded with explosive nitroglycerin over a treacherous mountain path. When every bump could blow them to the heavens, the men's nerve is tested to the limit, as is the audience's. Christopher Nolan admitted studying the film for his recent war thriller Dunkirk, and it's clear why: this is among the most purely suspenseful, gripping thrillers ever made."
Restored by the BFI and re-released 2 years ago, this is a classic film is every sense.

Programming news

Our draft programme for the 2019-20 season is abelow One classic is to be added (members will be asked to choose) and there will be 3 gaps left for new release films, as has become the norm.

All films are subject to confirmation with the distributors

1. **3 Faces.** Iran 2018.
2. **American Animals.** USA 2018.
3. **Arctic.** Iceland 2017.
4. **Birds of Passage.** Colombia 2018.
5. **Blindspotting.** USA 2018.
6. **Border.** Sweden 2018.
7. **Burning.** S Korea 2018.
8. **Capernaum.**
9. Lebanon/USA 2018.
10. **Cold War.** Poland/UK/France 2018.
11. **Dawson City: Frozen Time.** USA 2016.
12. **Dogman.** .Italy 2018.
13. **Free Solo.** USA 2018.
14. **Foxtrot. I**srael/France, Switzerland/Germany 2017.
15. **The House By The Sea**, France 2017.
16. **The Guilty**. Denmark 2018.
17. **Happy as Lazzaro**. Italy 2018.
18. **In Between. I**srael 2017.
19. **An Imperfect Age**. Italy 2018.
20. **Rafiki**i. Kenya 2018.
21. **Return of the Hero.** France/Belgium 2018.
22. **Sometimes Always Never.** UK 2018.
23. **Woman at War** 2018 Iceland/France/Ukraine.