

MOVIE REVIEWS

'The Salton Sea'

The cold "Salton Sea" enthusiastically revels in sleaze immersion.

By Kenneth Turan
Times Staff Writer

Apr 26 2002

"We encourage the support of this unique natural resource," the producers of "The Salton Sea" piously state in the film's closing credits, though it is not at all clear how having the goodwill of a smug and tawdry film is going to help that natural landmark. With friends like this, the Salton Sea will have no need of enemies.

Taking issue with efforts like "The Salton Sea," cold and unemotional films that couldn't be more pleased at the opportunity to enthusiastically drag audiences through unhappy material, is as futile as getting mad at the wind.

As long as a young male audience thinks de facto glamorized drug addiction is endlessly fascinating, as long as filmmakers feel immersing themselves in a sleazoids-on-parade world of transgressive characters is completely cool, as long as studio executives assume they're acting responsibly if they tack a credits footnote about substance abuse treatment next to that silly plea for the Salton Sea, movies like this will continue to be made. And frequently. It's not clear when and how watching women getting brutalized and seeing a starved, rabid badger taking realistic swipes at a terrified man's private parts added up to mass entertainment, but that's the world we're living in now. Written by Tony Gayton ("Murder by Numbers") and directed in his feature debut by D.J. Caruso, "The Salton Sea" does have a few things in its favor, including noticeable visual style (Amir Mokri is the cinematographer) and a story line that takes longer than 10 minutes to unfold. But a futility and impotence surround those qualities; they play as no more than window dressing vainly attempting to camouflage distant, off-putting material.

Given that scenario, it's not surprising to find Val Kilmer and Vincent D' Onofrio in the film's

leading roles. Both men are fine actors, but there are probably no two performers who are more in love with playing dress-up to the exclusion of everything else, with submerging themselves body and soul in weird characters, the weirder the better.

"The Salton Sea" opens with a jejune, overly familiar moment that is probably meant to be haunting. A man (Kilmer) sits calmly playing the trumpet as his surroundings go up in flames, trying to determine his own identity. Is he Danny Parker or Tom Van Allen, he asks in pseudo-sensitive voice-over, "avenging angel or Judas Iscariot. You decide who I am." Oh, brother.

Danny Parker, it turns out, is a complete speed freak, a character who lives in a world of days-long drug binges that the film re-creates in careful, loving and increasingly tedious detail. Which is just how Kilmer physically creates his character, down to Danny's extensive tattoos, elaborate chains, silver death's-head rings on nearly every finger, and pomaded, green-tinged hair.

It's difficult to convey how pleased with itself this film is to be inside what it presents as the daring, fascinating world of "tweakers," one of numerous slang phrases for methamphetamine users and the drug itself that come up again and again in the screenplay as verbal convincers for its authenticity. Even the film itself must sense how off-putting this is, because it has Danny say in voice-over, "I know what you're thinking. Don't give up on me yet."

The only thing that fascinates "The Salton Sea" more than users are the twisted, cardboard criminals that inevitably swarm into this world and who we are shanghaied into spending time with. For instance:

- * Bobby (Glenn Plummer), a completely addled dealer who hallucinates spiders and occupies himself beating the girlfriend he keeps stashed and squashed underneath his mattress;
- * Quincy (Luis Guzman), a surly lout always shown either just about to or just having finished beating the tar out of his unfortunate girlfriend Colette (Deborah Kara Unger);
- * Morgan (Doug Hutchison) and Garcetti (Anthony LaPaglia), the vicious and corrupt police officers we've come to expect in an atmosphere like this;
- * Pooh-Bear (D'Onofrio), the film's lowlife piece de resistance, who spends his spare time re-creating the Kennedy assassination with pigeons standing in for the first family. In an especially charming touch this rascal, named after the A.A. Milne character always getting his nose caught in the honey jar, has inhaled so many drugs his nose had to be very obviously amputated. And yes, we get to see the gnarly remains.

Gradually "The Salton Sea" reveals who Tom Van Allen is and how he relates to Danny, and frankly it's a tossup which character you least want to spend time with. "So who am I after all is said and done?" Danny/Tom asks once more at the close. "You tell me. I'm too tired." That makes two of us, pal, that makes two of us.

*

MPAA rating: R, for strong violence, drug use, language and some sexuality. Times guidelines: extensive drug use and a strong scene of a rabid badger menacing a defenseless human.

'The Salton Sea'

Val Kilmer...Danny/Tom

Vincent D'Onofrio...Pooh-Bear

Adam Goldberg...Kujo

Luis Guzman...Quincy

Doug Hutchison...Morgan

Anthony LaPaglia...Garcetti

Glenn Plummer...Bobby

Peter Sarsgaard...Jimmy the Finn

Deborah Kara Unger...Colette

Chandra West...Liz

B.D. Wong...Bubba

Castle Rock Entertainment presents a Darkwoods/Humble Journey Films production, released by Warner Bros. Pictures. Director D.J. Caruso. Producers Eriq La Salle, Ken Aguado, Butch Robinson. Executive producer Jim Behnke. Screenplay Tony Gayton. Cinematographer Amir Mokri. Editor Jim Page. Costumes Karyn Wagner. Music Thomas Newman. Production design Tom Southwell. Art director Douglas Cumming. Set decorator Amanda Moss Serino. Running time: 1 hour, 43 minutes.

In limited release.

Copyright 2004 Los Angeles Times