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The Salton Sea

A Warner Bros. release of a Castle Rock Entertainment presentation of a Darkwoods/Humble Journey Films production. Produced by Frank Darabont, Eriq LaSalle, Ken Aguado, Butch Robinson. Executive producer, Jim Behnke. Directed by D.J. Caruso. Screenplay, Tony Gayton.

Danny/Tom - Val Kilmer
Pooh-Bear - Vincent D'Onofrio
Kujo - Adam Goldberg
Quincy - Luis Guzman
Morgan - Doug Hutchison
Garcetti - Anthony LaPaglia
Bobby - Glenn Plummer
Jimmy The Finn - Peter Sarsgaard
Colette - Deborah Kara Unger
Liz - Chandra West
Bubba - B.D. Wong
Verne Plummer - R. Lee Ermey
Nancy - Shalom Harlow
Nancy Plummer - Shirley Knight
Bo - Meat Loaf
Teresa - Azura Skye
Big Bill - Josh Todd
Little Bill - Danny Trejo

By [ROBERT KOEHLER](#)

As part of the recent movement to dress up film noir in the latest fashion, "The Salton Sea" strains past the breaking point to provide the old genre with new couture. Tyro helmer D.J. Caruso appears compelled to strut his cinematic stuff in every

scene, whether called for or not, and in the process overplays his assignment. Tony Gayton's script, about how a husband who delves into L.A.'s wiggly methamphetamine subculture to seek revenge on his wife's killers, reveals a few clever strokes, including one major plot twist that's withheld until the moment of maximum impact. But this extremely plot-thickened tale finally offers little more than the usual genre elements pushed to the kind of extremes that recall the acrid "The Way of the Gun." Pic will draw in viewers game for a stylish swim through the worlds of drugs and undercover ops, just as it will test whatever is left of Val Kilmer's B.O. appeal.

Kilmer may have been attracted to the project as a chance to play a Dostoevskian man with a double self, but this is precisely where "The Salton Sea" is most disappointing. His ironical sounding voiceover at the start, as his trumpet-playing character is blowing while the building he's in is burning, informs that his name is "Tom, or Danny, I really don't know." He speculates whether he's a Judas or an avenging angel, a trumpet player or a speed freak. Though tantalizing, this prelude is shaken by a particularly fake overdubbing, in which Kilmer is obviously not playing (it's actually jazz hornman Terence Blanchard) Gil Evans' "Saeta."

Danny/Tom then launches into a witty, even educational precis on the history of meth. The highly mobile camera then whizzes into the present, where Danny -- for this is how he refers to himself to others -- is shooting up meth with his regular circle of addicts, including best pal Jimmy the Finn (Peter Sarsgaard) and the permanently nervous Kujo (Adam Goldberg).

There is one astonishing scene which, in retrospect, is fairly disconnected from the plotline but is more resonant and darkly funny than nearly anything else in the movie: Danny and Jimmy visit extremely addled meth addict Bobby (Glenn Plummer, in a knockout turn) to make a deal, and must witness his ways with a spear gun, bug spray and stifling his girlfriend with a bed mattress. Things shift back into standard mode with the good cop-bad cop tandem of narcs Morgan (Doug Hutchison) and Garcetti (Anthony LaPaglia), who apply the usual pressure on Danny to rat on the suppliers he hooks up with.

It would probably be enough that Danny learns his name is on the hit list of major drug lords and he must get out of Dodge; instead, his complications multiply, as he tries to aid and comfort Colette (Deborah Kara Unger), his new neighbor in his fleabag downtown hotel and a regular punching bag for abusive b.f. Quincy (Luis Guzman). Danny also reveals his other half by unpacking a set of clothes and his trumpet and momentarily taking on the role of jazz-playing Tom, while thinking back to easier, relaxing times with his now-dead wife, Liz (Chandra West) by the shore of the Salton Sea in the Southern

California desert.

Supposedly as a means to make a big sale to fund his escape, Danny arranges a meeting with ghoulish supplier Pooh-Bear (Vincent D'Onofrio), whose character embodies all that's good and bad about "The Salton Sea." Typically intro'd in over-the-top manner as he restages the JFK assassination with a remote-control car filled with pigeons, Pooh-Bear is your basic druggie bad guy writ large, down to wearing a plastic nose as a cover for the real one he had to lose from too much snorting. At every step, D'Onofrio has fun with this prototype (his touch of letting out ghostly breaths of air is a case of a thesp working every angle), but by the time Pooh-Bear is threatening Danny with a ravenous caged badger, it is all too much of a good thing.

So it is for the movie, which reveals at midpoint the true identity of Tom. Though the revelation is a bit of a coup de theatre, the way it plays out is awkward at best, while setting up the third act's settling of scores with both the evil cops and Pooh-Bear. Pic is bizarrely distinguished by having several false endings, completed by an actual conclusion that rings as colossally phony. If some of the wit indicated in Tom/Danny's narration had been included in the character as played, it may have leavened what ends up being a rather dour performance by Kilmer. Hard as he tries for that haunted look, Kilmer never finds a way of turning his man with a double life into a mesmerizing creature. By doing less -- a welcome difference from nearly everyone else in the cast -- Sarsgaard does more as the nice, naive Jimmy, whose sadness at the turn in events is genuinely felt to the core. In a sign that the already too busy storyline was trimmed back, the venerable Shirley Knight and R. Lee Ermey as Liz's parents show up for a uselessly brief scene with Kilmer.

Production looks fabulous, care of Amir Mokri's incendiary lensing and production designer Tom Southwell's taste for the creepy, but is seriously marred by unimaginative location choices made much too familiar from such recent pics as "The Fast and the Furious" and "Swordfish." Thomas Newman's score, adding electric guitar to his rich mix, is further proof that he is among Hollywood's most interesting composers.

Camera (Technicolor), Amir Mokri; editor, Jim Page; music, Thomas Newman; production designer, Tom Southwell; art director, Douglas Cumming; set designer, Eric Sundhal; set decorator, Amanda Moss Serino; costume designer, Karyn Wagner; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS/SDDS), Tom Cooney; supervising sound editor, Howell Gibbens; visual effects, RIOT Pictures; visual effects supervisor, David Sosalla; special effects coordinator, Darrell D. Pritchett; special makeup and animatronic effects, K.N.B. EFX Group; assistant director, Tony Adler; casting, Deborah Aquila. Reviewed at Egyptian Theater, L.A., Feb. 17, 2002. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 103 MIN.

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