

Whiplash ****

First published on www.squiss.co.uk

Wow! Just wow!

A young drummer, Andrew (Miles Teller) enrolls at a prestigious music conservatory. Plucked from a rehearsal room, he is given the opportunity to play with the studio band under the tutelage of aggressively driven band leader Fletcher (J.K. Simmons), a man with a vicious mouth, extreme methods and an obsession with driving his students way beyond breaking point in order to achieve their potential and find absolute perfection.

Perhaps my greatest joy with *Whiplash* is that just a few weeks ago I was barely aware of its existence and deliberately knew little about it as I took my seat in the screening room. There is something very special about being blindsided without expectation, and blindsided I was. My screening companion and I felt exhausted by the end and were still discussing animatedly it an hour later.

I knew I was in the presence of greatness within minutes of *Whiplash*. From the opening scenes of Andrew rehearsing and Fletcher observing, passing judgment and scything him down with sharpened tongue and looks that slayed, it was abundantly clear that writer/director Damien Chazelle was on a mission to hammer us repeatedly with verbal blades, withering looks and an intensity that other directors would kill to produce.

There are insufficient superlatives to express the power and effect of *Whiplash* and Chazelle's achievement. At least four times in the course of the screening my heart sank as Chazelle took us towards an alleyway that was predictable and certain to kick a five-star experience into another four-star, notable also-ran. Each time, he turned it around beautifully, steadfastly refusing to take the convenient route, instead aiming another kick at the tender parts, slamming us with the unexpected and leaving us to reel or look on in wide-eye admiration.

His brilliance is in the subtlety, the sharp cracks of dialogue that slice through the opposing character's confidence; it is in the reactions of the onlookers that we see once and only once, never over-egging a moment; it is in the blood, sweat and tears, literally, that coat the symbols; it is in the music, the performance and the slam of hand and stick on metal and skin and it is in the accompanying venomous glares that scream more eloquently than a thousand words could ever achieve.

Until last night, I didn't really 'get' jazz. After 107 minutes of *Whiplash* that passed in a heart-pounding, hair prickling moment, I can't get enough. If there had been a second screening I'd have put myself through the exhaustion again in an instant.

When the Oscar nominations are revealed tomorrow, I doubt if the Academy will honour *Whiplash* with a Best Film nod but I sincerely hope it is in the mix at least for director and editing. As for J.K. Simmons, his nomination and win as Best Supporting Actor are probably as much a certainty as Daniel Day Lewis was for Best Actor in 2013 for *Lincoln*. If Simmons doesn't clean up 90% of the principal awards and see his already superb career take a whole new trajectory after this, I'll eat my hat, and yours and every one I can find in the village! Good? *Whiplash* is damn near perfect and J.K. Simmons is a major reason for it!

For those who know J.K. Simmons as 'that guy from...', no longer is he going to be the go-to guy for irascible bosses and supporting characters. There is an effortlessness to his commanding performance as the teacher his students fear but whose validation they crave. Powerful, venomous, controlling, manipulative, vindictive... Fletcher is at turns both horrible and, perhaps, a genius. J.K. Simmons' utter ownership of the character pokes an electrified finger into every nerve prompting us to hate, fear and, just maybe, respect and admire a man who walks a razor sharp line between obsessive insanity and genius, all the time staring his victims in the eye, screaming into their face and daring them to take him on.

On the receiving end of much of his venom is Andrew, played with equal measure and control by Teller. It is a solid performance that meets

Simmons' all the way. More than that is Teller's performance at the drums that astound. He plays with his hands and his fists and his mind and his emotions and every ounce of fluid he can ring out of every available pore in his body. At the risk of sounding repetitive, wow. Just wow!

I recently reviewed *Big Eyes*, a true story that really didn't warrant a feature-length big screen outing. Conversely, *Whiplash* is an event I wish I could make a reality so that I could experience it in the flesh repeatedly.

Chazelle has crafted a film that is pretty much perfect. I fear it will receive a limited audience because, on paper, the premise doesn't blow anyone away: Teacher gives student a hard time; student struggles to find himself... But back in 1994, a little prison movie was released that was badly marketed, garnered seven Oscar nominations, didn't win a single one and bombed at the box office. It was only word of mouth and the DVD release that made the world sit up en masse and notice that *The Shawshank Redemption* for what it is. Perhaps *Whiplash* will go through a similar experience, though I suspect Oscar won't make the same mistake this time around.

The year is young but *Whiplash* is the best cinematic outing from it so far. See it, see it now and prepare for something remarkable. To steal a line, "I'll count you in..."