

Stone's 'Killers' a natural born blockbuster

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NATURAL BORN KILLERS
★★★ 1/2 (out of four stars)

Mickey and Mallory Knox are popular beyond their wildest imagination. Talented at what they do, admired by millions, and very much in love, they lead a pure untainted existence. Adorning the front covers of magazines, pursuing their mission through cross-country travel and exploring new ways they can make a difference in peoples' lives, the couple has never felt as free to seek out the American Dream as they do at this moment.

But Mickey and Mallory's line of work might be shocking to the average citizen. In Oliver Stone's gripping new adaptation of a Quentin Tarantino story, "Natural Born Killers", these two main characters are mass murderers who capture the imagination of the American people during their massive killing spree. Traversing the American landscape, the two kill 52 people in three weeks, are arrested, and that's just the beginning.

The hallucinogenic images Oliver Stone puts on the screen simply have to be seen to be believed. Employing a mixture of color with black and white cinematography and stylizing the film through the calculated randomness of switching from 35mm to grainy 16mm, old film reels, super-8mm, and home video style cameras, Stone plays with the audience as if he were the media manipulating viewers to keep watching. He creates unbelievable effects as illuminated words appear on bodies, as heads take on wavy morphing forms, and as gory footage is laid in motion behind current action.

During one sequence, Mickey and Mallory make love in a neon-lit motel room with the television on and a stripped female hostage gagged in the corner. Outside the window, Stone shows us footage of Nazis troops marching down a street. To these natural born killers, everything around them, inside and outside their minds, is comprised of systematic violence and abuse. This sequence serves to demonstrate the unending chain which continues today as strong as ever.

Stone switches dramatic tone of voice by using varying formats to avoid straight narrative. Depicting criminal acts as if they were part of a wicked game show, or a '70s adult Bakshi cartoon or even re-enactments on a tabloid news program, Stone lures viewers to focus their attention on the stars of his visual media circus.

Stone's most memorable tool to satirize the tragedy of his events is an early sequence modeled after a classic sitcom. Titled "I Love Mallory" and featuring Rodney Dangerfield and Edie McClurg as her parents, this absurd sequence gives insight into Mallory's years of sexual abuse and systematic verbal torture. To the rhythm of canned laughter and live audience hilarity, the spotlighted family makes incest jokes around the dinner table and gawks at Mallory's sexuality. Both awkward and relentlessly audacious, this sequence works equally well as satire and domestic tragedy of stupefying proportions. Later when Mickey and Mallory kill her parents and head out on their acid road-trip, Stone switches tone again in his depiction of the savage and brutal revenge the stars exact on their parental enemies.

Within minutes of the film's opening credits, Mickey and



KILLER STARS: Juliette Lewis and Woody Harrelson star as Mallory and Mickey Knox in Oliver Stone's "Natural Born Killers."

Mallory play target practice at a roadside diner. When a redneck harasses her as she dances beside a jukebox, he becomes one of their next victims. We watch a bullet speed towards a woman's head. Then a close-up shows us a cartoonish bullet come to a complete stop before it continues between her eyes.

The bloodthirsty duo dance like they just stepped out of a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musical and write poetry to each other as if their love was as pure and natural as the American flag and apple pie.

Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis are engaging as the two leads. Because Stone spends most of the time he focuses on characterization developing Mickey and Mallory, they are the only two characters with which the audience can sympathize. Completely absorbed in their romance with sex and violence, they create their niche in society by destroying others.

Harrelson gets to spray some unforgettable one-liners as he basks in the media limelight. As if he were the featured act in a comedy club, he mutters, "This is a tough room" during an interview. Like a preacher of evil, he tells the world that "Love kills the demon" and that "It's just murder man; all species do it." And like a wise sage who has knows his way is the right way, he says, "I'd take an instant of my purity to a lifetime of your lies."

This charismatic criminal even argues semantics with his interviewer, saying he is technically not a serial killer but only a mass murderer. A classic moment involves a lively discussion between Mickey and the interviewer about who was a bigger sensation, Mickey or Manson? Stone reflects back to us a world where we actually rate our society's villains according to entertainment value!

Lewis is especially effective as she uses her sexuality to draw in her prey. Sexually abused by her father as a child and teenager, she redeems her jaded soul by doing unto others what has been done to her. Seducing and destroying are her addictions. Stone often depicts Mallory as an innocent girl, dancing about with an angelic glow around her skin under a dark sky. Her paradise lost, replaced by the newfound wonders of sexual battery and ultraviolence, is tragic indeed.

Stone gives us glimpses at the inner states of these shattered minds occasionally through flashbacks but mostly through media-enhanced case histories which seem all too familiar to a culture gorged on this madness.

Everything is violence in their world, and even the date-lines of the film's activities range from "One Year Later" to "Super Bowl Sunday," showing how society even structures life around violent sport as much as they do around religious holidays.

Their cross-country car rides are surrounded by a quagmire of crimson skies and clanging noises. Their journey is like a carnival tunnel of love, and they are intentionally oblivious to the harm they are doing. As they kiss in front of a drapery of human carcasses, hung like dead meat from blood-drenched walls, Mickey can only tell Mallory how much he loves her.

Other fine performances are added by Tom Sizemore as a headline-grabbing cop and Robert Downey Jr. as an Aussie auteur of sleaze journalism out to get the story of the century. His character shoots too, but his shooting of film is considered just as dangerous to American society as anything the mass murderers do.

A telling moment for the ratings-obsessed reporter is when he becomes a victim of the madness he has helped create, and he begs for life by screaming all the "good" stories he has done over the years. His conjuring of positive credentials for himself is a stretch indeed.

Like Kubrick did with his visionary film A Clockwork Orange, Stone makes all the characters except the central stars obnoxious and uninvolved. Each slaying of a human being seems but another killing of some mindless idiot. Stone gives insight into the terrifying childhoods of Mickey and Mallory, and as they throw all artifacts of childhood off into a deep chasm, the audience understands the pain which has dehumanized them, rendering them immune to emotions and numb to society.

Hurting others seems a fitting alternative to suicide or incarceration. For Mickey and Mallory, they have already lived lives in hell and revel in the spiritual fulfillment they find in a comforting violent American tradition.

Unfortunately the film's ultimate message is clouded by Stone's ambiguous ending. Perhaps he was afraid of becoming too preachy as he has before in Born on the 4th of July and JFK. Stone's failure to give the audience a crucial final punch leaves this biting commentary without bite. The haunting images and visually exhausting juggernaut seem little more than a glorified depiction of rampant massacre without a final blow.

Instead Stone uses the film as an all-out indictment of the media throughout the movie. Portraying the scattershot method of conjuring up news items, the hypnotism of the population who are persuaded to keep watching, and the extent to which unscrupulous scavengers will go to dig up more fool's gold, Stone connects his allegory to today's most preposterous headlines to cement his point. A world in which Buttofuoco and Bobbitt get more press for their scandalous lives than national leaders get for their agendas affecting national policy is in desperate need of re-examination. In a world saturated with violence and terror, when American Gladiators is a popular television show and the murder trial of O.J. Simpson captures more headlines than national health care reform, Stone reminds us how far society has skewed in defining its promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Ignoring the sketchy finale, "Natural Born Killers" is the most uncompromising film by a major studio in years, and the credit goes to a director unflinching in the face of controversy. Taking our society of spectacle just one step further than today's reality yields what could undoubtedly become any day now the most frightening and riveting piece of non-fiction produced in years.

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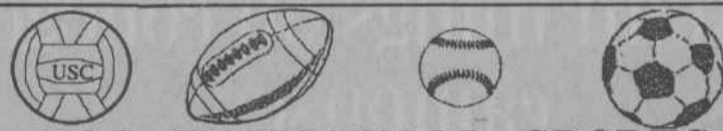
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12:30	Step* Gym 307	Lower Hall* Gym 307	20/20/20* Gym 307	Body Sculpting Gym 307	High/Low Gym 307		
1:00							20/20/20* Gym 308
1:05	Faculty & Staff Enrichment Gym 308		Faculty & Staff Enrichment Gym 308	Faculty & Staff Enrichment Gym 308			
2:00						Step* Gym 308	
4:00	Lower Hall* Gym 308	20/20/20* Gym 308	Body Sculpting Gym 308	Lower Hall* Gym 308	20/20/20* Gym 308		
5:00							High/Low Gym 308
5:15	High Energy Gym 308	Step* Gym 308	High Energy Gym 308	High/Low Gym 308	Step* Gym 308		
5:30	High/Low H2O Pool	High/Low H2O Pool	High/Low H2O Pool	High/Low H2O Pool			
6:30	20/20/20* Gym 308	High/Low Gym 308	Step* Gym 308	20/20/20* Gym 308			

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