

The Slow Boil of Last Days of Summer

William Fichtner is a prolific character actor with a long and prominent body of work. If you don't recognize the name, you definitely would recognize his distinctive face — stretched and doe-eyed — as that of the obsessive detective in *Prison Break*, or perhaps the leader of the free world (by default, since everyone else was killed or fell through a plot hole) in *Independence Day 2*. For me, he stands out most as the odd, quirky and subtly disturbing Sheriff in "Invasion," a short-lived but wonderful bodysnatcher-esque TV series from before sci-fi was cool (or spelled with any y's). That show got a lot of mileage out of "is he a human or is he an alien?" moments, and that's the performance that most came to mind when watching his latest film, a Hitchcock-flavored, slow-building character piece that depends almost entirely on Fichtner's strong, haunting performance.

The Last Days of Summer premiered at the prestigious Rhode Island International Film Festival to a full house. The gentle thriller follows Fichtner's Mike, a work-at-home technical writer with a kind nature but clear challenges interacting with fellow humans. When an attractive, much younger couple moves in next door, the boundaries of appropriate neighborly behavior are redefined.

From the languid opening shot, the film establishes that it will not rush to tell its story. The dialog and story are finely crafted, and the world we enter is very real — devoid of exposition and often leaving threads and backstory open to interpretation. As befits a low-budget thriller, the settings are intimate and confined — the gap in Mike's backyard fence is practically a character unto itself, with moods ranging from inviting to desperate to threatening. The bulk of the storytelling is left to the simple but elegant cinematography and a number of strong, nuanced performances. Mike is odd, uptight, even a little alien in his movements, yet he holds the camera and our attention with restrained intensity.

Jessica McNamee ("Sirens," the upcoming *CHiPS*) is suitably, subtly seductive as Jenna, an easy-to-fall-for girl next door, and Jean Louisa Kelly ("Yes, Dear") is entrancing as Lisa, Mike's smart, assured wife who knows him a little too well.

In an intriguing twist on the tradition of the unreliable narrator, the story comes so completely from Mike's perspective that we are left wondering how accurate the information the film is feeding us really is. Is annoying neighbor Scott, played with playfully engaging menace by *Smallville*'s Lex Luthor, Michael Rosenbaum, really the villain he immediately seems to us and David? No one else seems to be put off by his seemingly obviously excesses. Several characters seem to turn sudden, dramatic corners in how they treat Mike, without much forewarning. That's how some slowly developing emotional reactions might appear to someone who has difficulty forming empathetic relationships. Are we seeing the true story, or Mike's story? Is Mike a protector or dangerously obsessed?

The filmmakers wanted to "explore the gray area between harmless attraction and dangerous obsession," according to writer/director Aaron Harvey; between "see something, say something" and normal social discretion; between mid-life crisis and total breakdown. The questions they raise will intrigue long after the story fades to black.

This is an excellent watch if you like slowly building, thought-provoking portraits.