

Waterborne



Waterborne is an entertaining film depicting the aftermath of a biological attack on the city water supply in Los Angeles California. The story is set post 911 and is fraught with referrals to that attack. The story opens with a narration by one of the main characters Zack played by Chris Masterson. The movie frequently reverts back to Zack's first person soliloquies, where he reflects on the experience in the past tense. This gives the viewer a temporal context in which to take the story.

The story opens essentially with a news cast that advises the city of some deaths that have occurred as a result of consuming water that is thought to be poisoned in some way. The residents are advised not to consume any water from the public water supply until the cause can be determined and eliminated. The film then follows three groups of people whose stories intertwine as they deal with a biological water emergency, the search for drinkable water and the chaos that swallows the city.

The development of the characters is well executed and perhaps the best direction and acting in the film. There is a good sense of the characters related in a very succinct and personal way. Here there is a sense that you truly know the characters, as they are portrayed in that generic everyman sense, with just enough personality added to make it familiar yet believable and real. I thought the characters were well thought out and well executed by the story and the actors.

Zack and his cousin Bodi (Jake Muxworthy) are 20 something single guys who are living together in the city. Masterson plays the more grounded of the two. He is a college student who allows his slacker cousin crash at his place. The cousin Bodi, is a pot smoking loose cannon with multiple troubling attributes. The dialog between the two quickly establishes a relationship based on tolerance on the part of Zack, and manipulative user on the part of cousin Bodi. In the wake of the water shortage, the two decide to leave the city to Zack's dad's place in the hills.

A second story line follows a young Sikh man Vic (Ajay Naidu) and his Jewish girl friend Lilian (Mageina Tova) as he deals with his mother's disapproval of the girl he has chosen as well as feelings of oppression by racist elements in the city. The store run by the Vic's mother, one of the last to have water for sale becomes the target of violence presumably because of the water price hikes made in wake of the shortage. The movie makes an attempt to bring this racist side story into the forefront, but the story comes off as slightly disjointed when they attempt to integrate it into the biological disaster storyline. It works, but it seems strained.

In California, Cal. Penal Code sec. 396 prohibits price hikes of more than 10% of the price, prior to the emergency, of emergency supplies, for a period of 30 days following a declared disaster, and is punishable with a maximum county jail term of one year or a maximum fine of

\$10,000, or both. However, if the merchant can demonstrate that a price hike of more than 10% resulted from additional costs imposed by the supplier, then this may be a defense.

Finally the storyline also follows a California National Guard Sergeant Ritter (Jon Gries) as he tries to balance his obligations as a soldier, and his responsibility to care for his family in this crisis.

The lives of these three groups are thrust together in a tragic unfolding of events that make this story resonate with the feeling that our lives are necessarily intertwined in ways that we could never conceive of. The randomness of the interchanges gives the impression that the story occurs in a small community rather than the huge LA metropolitan area, but that is easily dismissed in light of the compelling story it produces.

The acting in the picture, while not stellar, was better than what I would consider B rated. The actors, with the exception of some of the military scenes did a fine job. The cinematography was closer to a made for television special than a major motion picture, but it sufficed to relate the story. The story really was deserving of a larger budget production. There is no reason that it could not have been treated to a major motion picture production effort. The film was written and directed by Ben Rehki. This was his first film to direct, and it showed. Ben has some significant experience in filming and camera work, but has not had enough directing opportunities to overcome some of the film school attempts at “creative camera angle”, and dramatic entry, or exit of scene. The direction seemed somewhat disjointed, and at times made the story seem chopped up. I got the feeling that there was too much effort to be “artistic” or poignant but it just came out as choppy. This is a critical approach to the critique of this film, and as such I will point out where I think the effort could have been better executed. However, all in all I really enjoyed the movie. It kept my attention and I was even in suspense a few times.

I really think the story was intriguing, as was the use of different perspectives to describe the story or situation from differing points of view.

The musical score is also somewhat disjointed, I assume to lend to the theme of perspective by the different characters in the film. There is some popular music that helped move the story pace along, as well as enhance certain dramatic effect where needed, but there was also a fair amount of ethnic music associated with the scenes involving the seik family. This ethnic music became quite tedious at times and while I appreciated it being used in the religious scenes and to bolster the idea that there was indeed a cultural gap to consider I thought it was a little too much for too long.

The legal aspects of the film were interesting at the state law level, but federal law was also a part of the action. There was certainly an issue of *posse comitatus*, when the National Guard was employed in a law enforcement capacity. Legally, the authority under which the troops were operating would be important to the question of the legality of the action. Federal activation under Title 10 would be more questionable than deployment under Title 32. Further there were actions by the soldiers that would raise some rules of engagement questions when they engaged citizens at different points throughout the story.

The scientific aspect on the other hand is significant. The impact that was portrayed seemed to be about what I would imagine. Huge! The story never elucidated the agent used, or how it was able to survive the filtration process, but it was rather interesting how the symptoms seemed to mirror several of the agents that I would suspect could be used in such a way. The desperation that ensued as a result of the water crisis is alarmingly well played. When one considers the impact that such an occurrence would create the movie becomes that much more compelling.

I would recommend this film to anyone interested in the topics of bioterrorism, disaster management, or public health, as well as for the entertainment value as a drama, regardless of an interest in the topic. The film is appropriate for a varied audience with some depiction of drug use and adult content, and only marginal violence that is depicted in such a way as to give strength to the scene without resorting to glorified violence for its own sake.