

## Red State Review

Written by Ellen Tremiti, Fanboy Comics Contributor  
Friday, 25 March 2011 00:00

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I was lucky to attend the Sundance premiere of Kevin Smith's highly anticipated horror flick *Red State*

, starring up-and-coming actors Michael Angarano, Kyle Gallner, and Nicholas Braun, as well as established actors Michael Parks (

*Then Came Bronson, Twin Peaks, Kill Bill Vol. 1 & 2, Grindhouse*

), Oscar-winner Melissa Leo, and John Goodman. When I arrived at Eccles Theater in Park City, Utah, I was greeted by a huge line and a mix of protesters: half, serious religious picketers, half, ironical picketers, which included Kevin Smith himself, as well as a teen with my favorite sign that read: God Hates That I Couldn't Get Tickets To

*Red State*

. The film centers on a trio of high school youngsters (Angarano, Gallner, and Braun) who, out of a combination of sheer boredom and raging hormones, respond to a woman's internet sex ad in the hopes of having an ill-planned, and ill-fated, gangbang. Smith leaves his signature mark on this film with witty banter, unapologetic plot twists, and overt social critique, but his own style ultimately ends up hurting the film. Watching *Red State* was a hard-to-swallow experience, as there is as much good as there are short comings, and I was left with the frustrating—and not uncommon—sentiment that hidden somewhere in this film was the potential for greatness.

The movie wastes no time setting up its main players with a first act that is fairly engaging and most closely resembles traditional horror. One of our trio of gangbang hopefuls runs late to school when a protest, put on by the Five Points Church (based on the controversial Westboro Baptist Church), blocks the road as they protest the funeral of a young man. This segues into exposition on Free Speech and what the Five Points Church is all about: a church group based upon homophobic doctrine. Tension is palpable as the hatred and discrimination of the Five Points Church juxtaposes itself with the naïveté of the trio of teenage friends. The boys' plan is put into motion, but like any good horror movie, it doesn't go off without a hitch. When they finally get to the woman (Melissa Leo) who had advertised the sex ad, the boys are nervous, but ready. Instead of engaging in a sexual fantasy, however, they quickly find themselves drugged and bound prisoners of the fundamentalist Five Points Church.

The church's eerily sinister pastor (Michael Parks) steals the show with lengthy sermons that come across as engaging and horrifying, and just as the film starts to slow to a painful stop, the action picks up, and the body count begins. The friends must escape their captors, who are Hell-bent on enacting their own brand of sweet justice upon these horrible sinners. Around this time, the energy sustains and the last few "Yes! I knew this part was coming!" quintessential horror moments inject the film with hope that it's only going to get better. Unfortunately, Smith

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doesn't seem to know what to do with his own satire, and, instead of delving deeper into the themes he eagerly set up, he pushes the film away from its serious topics. The characters we try to follow start dropping like flies and while John Goodman's performance as a head of the ATF law enforcement agency is solid, his role to transition the movie from traditional horror to action is somewhat disappointing and rocky.

At this point, it's obvious that Smith is unafraid to take chances and to turn the horror genre on its head, which could have been refreshing if it had been executed better. What's also obvious is that Smith could have used help on the *Red State* script, but instead of allowing himself, and potentially another writer, to expand on his themes in order to make a real, more subtle statement about religion, prejudice, and humanity, he gets stuck and shrinks behind hollow action sequences. After the screening Smith stated that he set out to create a movie "without one redeeming character," but his mission is misguided. We don't have to root for the protagonists; I enjoy unlikable protagonists, but he could have given us more to think about. He could have given us a more complete story, which would have demanded more from the audience. Overall, the concept is admirable and gutsy. Some moments are riveting, and the pain the characters exude once subjected to the judgments of the Five Points community is chilling and somber to see. It's hard not to want to chastise Smith for not knowing better at this point in his career though. We want to love this film, Kevin! It's kind of, almost there! How could you let us down?

If you want to see an indelible performance by Michael Parks and your interest is peaked by the *Red State* trailer, it's worth a viewing, just proceed with caution; entering this movie with high expectations may end in disappointment.