

Rebel Yell - Arts & Entertainment
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Movie close to home: "Self Medicated"

By Mike Speegle

"Self Medicated" is, in essence, Monty Lapica's life on film. Sure, the names have been changed to protect the innocent, but the locations, the story and the characters are faithful to within one-tenth of a probability unit. At some point during the film I actually experienced a strange kind of vertigo, waving my hand at the screen, wondering if I was watching a movie or if I had somehow been sucked back in time to that party we had out at the end of Jones Blvd., the one that the BLM broke up.

But Lapica is just that good. Aside from the somewhat harrowing subject matter, which we will get to in a second, the movie is so faithful to the whole "growing up troubled in Las Vegas" concept, that it actually makes every Vegas movie up until now seem actually less believable by comparison. Every time the characters drive down the I-15, stand in front of their houses or even roam the halls at school, the authenticity fairly slaps you in the face. No "Las Vegas as a Los Angeles back lot" here, my friend. No sir. The somewhat grainy 35 mm film only heightens the effect, although I am not sure how less clarity makes it feel more real. It just works.

It's going to make you uncomfortable, though. "Self Medicated" is a true story, but not the kind you used to watch on Lifetime Channel when no one was looking. Julia Roberts is nowhere to be seen, and thank God for that.

When Lapica was 17, his mother had him kidnapped. No, not the "Give us the money or the kid gets it" kind, but rather the kind you may have seen on "Sally." You know, those episodes that were so in vogue in the late '90s, the ones entitled "My Child is Out of Control!" Yeah, sure you haven't seen it. Well, as a refresher course, these mothers would come on the show, carry on about how their kids are monsters and how they are fresh out of ideas. Then, in a big flourish, a big scary Marine-type guy shows up and drags the little miscreants to a camp where they can "get the help they need." In reality, however, these places can be hotbeds of abuse and degradation.

Lapica, acting as Andrew Eriksen, was sent to just such a place, the Morningside Institute in Utah. He in turn uses his more than considerable intellect to foment rebellion and stage an escape, only to be tracked back down later by his erstwhile jailers. What ensues is a spiritual and intellectual journey upon which Eriksen has to decide how, and indeed whether, he wants to live.

The cast features such big screen veterans such as Diane Venora ("The Insider," "Heat") and Michael Bowen ("Kill Bill." His name is Buck, and he's here to, well ...). Also, Kristina Anapau ("Cursed," "Cruel Intentions 3") puts in an appearance as Eriksen's sylphlike best friend/unassuming romantic interest. The real star of the show, though, is not so much Lapica as his relationship to the source material. There are times when the viewer is not entirely sure that a script is even being acted out any more. It's almost like the story is happening again, and we are viewing it on our Wayback Machine.

It's not all gravy, though. Lapica uses a kind of pixilation effect on the flashback scene that almost hurts the near-documentary realism of the piece. In that same vein, some of the dialogue has a hesitant, almost stilted quality. This could almost be excused, because the level of believability is high enough that one is not entirely sure if it is intentional or not.

Lapica wears many hats. In "Self Medicated," he dons every chapeau from director to producer, with the occasional starring role in between. To most, sporting such headgear would be a heavy load indeed, but

Lapica wears them like could handle a few more. After the premiere (but before his own after-party), he took on the role of interviewee and graciously agreed to answer a few questions.

Rebel Yell: How close was [the film] to real life?

Monty Lapica: The core of it is as true as it gets, but a lot of it has been exaggerated. For instance, the intelligence factor has been overexaggerated, and a lot of the scenes at Brightway never happened. A lot of it was made up for dramatization purposes.

RY: Who influenced you the most in becoming a filmmaker?

ML: My favorite filmmaker is Michael Mann. I like how he makes intelligent movies for the mainstream, like "The Insider." It's a really smart, intelligent story about subject matter that probably wouldn't be ... the way he constructs a story, the way he develops the character and what he does with the camera, he draws you into the story no matter how benign or innocuous the subject matter may be.

RY: Is that directing style going to influence your next film?

ML: Well, yeah, that's my story. That's something I am working very hard on right now. I feel like I have a concept right now that's so strong, but the way I want to tell the story is so complex that it's by far the most difficult task I've ever undertaken. Every time I sit down to write, I'm saying, "How am I ever going to express what I'm trying to do here?" But that's why I love making movie, because it's the hardest thing to do.

RY: What's great about the movie is that most films you see about Las Vegas are cheesy.

ML: All about the glamour.

RY: Exactly.

ML: It's all about what goes on in the outskirts, what it's really like to grow up in Las Vegas.

RY: Another thing, it seemed like it didn't do that "CSI" thing where 90 percent of the movie was filmed in Los Angeles.

ML: The entire movie was filmed on location. The only time we used a set was for the airport scene, because after 9-11 [p.m.] it was impossible to film in an airport.

RY: That's what helps, though, because as in the party scene in the movie, [the audience] will see things that have happened [to them] growing up here.

ML: If that's what happens, then that's tremendous. I've always wondered, how [the film] would conceptually differ for someone who grew up in Las Vegas, or lived here for quite some time, as opposed to someone who has no idea what it's like to live in Vegas, apart from just visiting the strip on vacation, will they be able to relate to the story.

RY: It's interesting, though, that one of the things that [Las Vegas audiences] may be familiar with is where you picked him up, at the I-15 exit [right before the Rio].

ML: That's funny, because that's exactly why I chose that location! I don't see him so much anymore, but while I was writing the film I was thinking precisely about that individual.

RY: I saw him on the way here today.

ML: No kidding?

RY: Yeah, the guy in the wheelchair. So what did your mom think about the movie?

ML: I was more excited about showing my mom tonight than anything else, even though this is the first time that any audience has seen it. It took two years in the production time, filming when we had money ... And my mom was just waiting, asking "Why are you taking so long?" and "When can I see it?" and I never showed her a frame until tonight.

RY: Wow, and so that scene [during the resolution of the film] must have been...

ML: Yeah, she was crying, holding my hand crying. I really did put her through a lot of heartache, because of my immaturity dealing with the loss of my dad.

RY: And [sending kids away] was so in popular at the time. Parents seeing these programs were all "Wow, my kid may not have those same problems, or even be that bad." But it may have seemed like such an easy way out.

ML: You're right. The parents don't have the whole picture. Because they actually send my mom some stuff before they sent me away, and it had all these pictures of waterfalls and like songs around the campfire with guitar. [But] they're really completely unaware of what really goes on. They can get away with a lot. The camp that I was sent to, in Samoa, they actually shut it down because a kid who went there actually died. But the parent company is still in operation and they have operations in Jamaica and Prague [Czech Republic].

RY: Lastly, is it going to open in mainstream theaters, and if so, how many nationwide?

ML: The plan, as of now, is to take the film to some of the more prominent film festivals and then, once the film is picked up for distribution, it will play in limited release at a handful of select theaters that play independent films.

RY: I'm looking forward to it.
