

movies

It's all in the gist

Splendidly written Winnipeg indie comedy *Foodland* highlights what a good screenplay can do for a film

movie review

★★★★½

FOODLAND

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Kenton Smith

You want to distinguish your no-budget indie feature? Spend a little time with yourself... writing a good screenplay.

So much, after all, is out of one's control when making a film. James Cameron compares it to war, imposing order on chaos.

One thing all filmmakers have absolute control over, however, is the script. If you know you have budget restraints, you obviously won't write a screenplay with flying cars 'n shit. But, within feasible parameters, any filmmaker has total command over his or her own final draft.

It's the writing that distinguishes *Foodland*, the new Winnipeg-made, low-budget indie comedy from writer/director Adam Smoluk.

While the film's evidently limited resources are used to its advantage (more on that later), the twisty, often brilliant plotting overcomes the production's limitations. This is an entertaining film that holds the attention.

Trevor (James Clayton) is an employee at Foodland, a crappy-looking grocery store that seems to, at best, only ever have one or two customers skulking in the background. He needs the job to afford classes, but he's under the thumb of pompous assistant manager Rick (Aaron Merke).

Then Trevor gets unexpectedly roped up into... er, well, seemingly preventing a robbery, but the next day it's more like Trevor and pathetic manager Ian (Ross McMillan) are the ones with ink on their fingers. Then things are further complicated with the involvement of P.I. Glen Munn (Stephen Eric McIntyre).

If you've read screenwriting guru Syd Field's books, you'll recall his breakdown of screenplay into succeeding plot points — that is, developments that spin the action in some new direction. *Foodland*, like the films of the Coen brothers, seems to want to set records

for sheer number of turns: the plot fishtails continuously to the final scene, one cockamamie thing after another.

It keeps the hook in, but this is not just a matter of Smoluk showing off: the story's increasingly preposterous dimensions become an expression of character. This lot are such, well, losers. It's not (only) that they dress badly or are deficient in personality; they're vain, stupid and petty, too. Even the put-upon Trevor is a laughable pushover, letting himself get bogged down in his boss' ass-hattery.

If the movie is unmistakably low budget, it also looks like it's straining against that leash: you sense these filmmakers could clean up good, given more cosmetic support. Yet the cheap look may actually suit the material, concerning such low-rent characters in a low-rent milieu. The lack of a polished sheen only underlines their pitiful amateurism.

Smoluk builds on that idea in other creative ways. I loved the symmetry involving a plunger, and how its introduction is unexpectedly but fittingly paid off. Beneath the come-



From left: Stephen Eric McIntyre, James Clayton and Ross McMillan in *Foodland*.

dy of errors, the film also says something about people who will always be limited by their small-time imaginations.

Tron: Legacy cost some \$170 million and came almost 30 years after the original, yet doesn't have a single original idea.

Foodland may be a bit scruffy to look at, but it has energy and wit and creativity to spare. It's all in the gist.

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diversions