

# THE DEEP END

## SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

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A mother will always fight to the death for the welfare of her children, but when that mother happens to be the great Tilda Swinton, the fight enters a startling new arena. In "The Deep End," Scott McGehee and David Siegel's polished follow-up to "Suture," Swinton wields those glassy cat-like eyes with such a cool vengeance that her frigid composure becomes a kind of suspense mechanism unto itself. Kim Carnes should think about taking her voice out of mothballs to pay tribute to the Tilda Swinton Eyes that help keep this slick suspenser afloat.

A domestic noir that takes its own sweet (and sometimes sour) time to gain momentum, "The Deep End" centers on Lake Tahoe über-mom Margaret Hall, who discovers after trailing a matchbook address to a sleazy gay bar in Reno that her teenage son Beau (Jonathan Tucker) might be hanging with the wrong crowd. So repressed that she can't bear to utter the word "gay," Margaret offers scumbag nightclub impresario Darby Reese (Josh Lucas) a sum of cash to stop seeing Beau, knowing instinctively (as mothers do) that her closeted son has fallen in love with a fast-living lothario.

A college-bound musical prodigy with a fragile demeanor, Beau is Margaret's pride and joy -- a masculine substitute for her naval officer husband who's at sea on an aircraft carrier. When Reese comes calling and winds up dead on the shore of the Hall's lakefront property with an anchor impaled in his stomach (we never see the accident itself), Margaret leaps into action to protect Beau's future and the Hall family's reputation. After submerging Reese's body in a remote corner of Lake Tahoe, Margaret waits for life to return to normal until smoldering blackmailer Alec Spera (Goran Visnjic) shows up with an explicit videotape of Beau in bed with Reese.

The desperate SUV soccer mom tries to raise \$50,000 in cash in 24 hours -- by pawning her wedding ring and trying to mortgage the house after Spera and his boss (Raymond J. Barry) threaten to deliver the footage to the news media. But Spera finds himself unable to put pressure on Margaret. He feels sorry for her, for reasons that seem incredulous at first, until you recall Swinton's sublime gift for transforming a poker face into something lethal. Just how far will Margaret go to protect Beau from the wolves? Is she really as cool, calm and collected as she seems?

In a stellar performance, the incomparable British actress, bearing no trace of an accent, inhabits Margaret Hall with such a still ferocity that you expect her to shatter

like porcelain before the methodical thriller slowly builds to its shocking conclusion. Swinton's composure is like a Vermeer painting: Look close enough and you see the cracks in the surface.

McGehee and Siegel's capacity for wildly original plot devices isn't as immediately apparent in their follow-up to "Suture," the psychological thriller in which its black male protagonist was perceived by those around him as being Caucasian. "The Deep End" is a far more subtle and controlled piece of work -- on the surface at least. Its principal concern remains outward appearances and tension, but it's determined not to drift over the top into the noir hysterics of its predecessor. Instead, it plunges straight to the bottom -- to the deep end of its own murky title -- and this is where the filmmakers nearly stumble over their own cool, clever conceits.

"The Deep End," you see, is awash in water motifs -- so many, in fact, that the story feels oversaturated at times. The directors love water. They shoot scenes through aquariums, inside a car wash, as water cascades in sheets across a windshield -- even through a droplet hanging from the kitchen faucet. Margaret's youngest child plays a swan in a grade-school performance of "Swan Lake;" her husband's off floating in the North Atlantic; her father-in-law suffers a heart attack while lifting a jug of drinking water. So much water! In the film's most peculiar moment, a speedboat suspended in mid-air drifts into the scene. Seconds later we see that it's attached to a forklift, but the message is clear: Everyone and everything in "The Deep End" is submerged in the amniotic fluid of the world's most overbearing mother. She's a succubus extraordinaire.

It's such an obvious conceit that in the end McGehee and Siegel fail to exercise much subtlety at all. Instead they drive the plot towards a bloody denouement that seems at once farfetched and underwhelming, a psychosexual cat and mouse game between a woman and her blackmailer, less over the fate of Margaret's gay son than over her own capacity to remain in absolute control of every situation. When she finally does lose control, she's an ice queen who's melted away into a bleak puddle of run-off.

There's a kooky theory floating around child-rearing circles that a large proportion of gay kids were breast-fed longer than their heterosexual counterparts -- it's also believed that some gay men never manage to elude their overbearing mothers. Who knows if McGehee and Siegel are mining this sort of terrain. The movie's in denial of its own queerness even with a gay icon like Swinton ravaging every frame. The duo claims to have been inspired by Max Ophuls' "The Reckless Moment," a melodrama exploring familial restraint and the rigidity of societal mores.

But the film seems more preoccupied with what happens to a mother who nurses for too long. In "The Deep End," it's not simply Beau Hall who's attached like a

parasite to his mother's suffocating teat, it's all the characters in the movie -- it's everyone who's watching. For a film that feels so chilly and detached, it's oddly engrossing, even nourishing at times. Just make sure you pee before you see it.

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