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Andrea Arnoldâ??s profound portrait of lost youth in American Honey

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

By Barry Hertz

Quick, imagine the most insufferable movie you can. Would it be almost three hours long? Focus on barely recognizable teens engaged in barely legal activities? With lots of close-ups of insects and filth and general decay? Oh, and would Shia LaBeouf inexplicably be there, too, along with the worst rat-tail haircut in the history of rat-tail haircuts?

If so, then we have all just collectively imagined the new drama *American Honey*. But while the film does indeed feature all those queasy elements â?? plus copious nudity, enough racially tinged profanity to rival a Quentin Tarantino script and more, more, more â?? it is also something of a miracle: a hypnotizing work of profound artistry that paints an exquisitely devastating, emotionally exhausting portrait of Americaâ??s lost youth.

Of course, knowing that *American Honey* is an Andrea Arnold film makes all the difference â?? there is no other filmmaker working today who can spin such scenes of skeezy misery into high art. From her early short film *Wasp* to her features *Red Road*, *Fish Tank* and a bold retelling of *Wuthering Heights*, the British director has proved herself to be the reigning champion of what Iâ??m going to haphazardly dub Squalor Cinema â?? films that aggressively explore the corners of society that most moviegoers would rather ignore, but are all the more mesmerizing for their ability to reveal intense slivers of overwhelming beauty between the cracks.

Four stars: American Honey a gritty, captivating look at a lost generation

Arnoldâ??s work is a kind of controlled chaos â?? impulsive, raw and ultimately rewarding â?? which is no surprise given how the filmmaker tends to operate. â??I remember I was at Sundance for *Wuthering Heights* in 2012, and I was supposed to go back home to start on making [*American Honey*]. The driver was taking me to the airport, and suddenly the sun came out over the mountains of Utah, and it was so staggering and I thought, â??What the hell am I doing?â??â?• Arnold says over the phone from London. â??I was going to make a film about America and I hadnâ??t spent any time here, so how am I

going to write about it if I donâ??t see it? So I got to the airport, rented a car and took a road trip.â?•

That impromptu road trip would be the first of many for Arnold as she crisscrossed the United States for several years, travelling up and down both coasts and through Middle America in an effort to flesh out an idea she had been sitting on since reading a 2007 New York Times article about â??mag crewsâ?• â?? ragtag groups of itinerant teens who sold magazine subscriptions door to door, when not partying to excess in cheap motels.

â??I tried to go to places where either the mag kids could come from â?? these small towns with endless horizons, a lot of space between them with nothing to do â?? and where they went to sell,â?• Arnold, 55, says. â??And I started to experience what it was like for kids on those crews. I hung out with them, and then at some point, we started casting them.â?•

Although it was a slow process, it was an intense one, with Arnold and her crew eventually collecting a dozen or so mostly amateur actors to populate her crew of reckless, raging teens. Even the filmâ??s lead actress, the spellbinding first-time performer Sasha Lane, was found by happy accident on a beach in Panama City, Fla.

â??There was another girl who was cast for quite a long time, but about three weeks before production, she had personal reasons why she shouldnâ??t go through with it. So I got on an airplane, and just hung out on the beach,â?• Arnold says. â??We found Sasha three or four days in, and it was complete luck. She turned out to be amazing, and I rewrote the part for her as we went along, every single day, just sitting in my hotel room with my laptop as we tried to keep going.â?•

The only experienced actors to appear in the film are Riley Keough (*The Girlfriend Experience*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*) as the mag crewâ??s conniving boss, and LaBeouf, as the groupâ??s top salesman, a volatile charmer who takes an interest in Laneâ??s naive newcomer, Star. (On working with the notoriously erratic LaBeouf, Arnold is beyond diplomatic: â??Iâ??m somebody who likes people who have personality, and heâ??s got lots of personality. I make my own mind up about people when I meet them, so I didnâ??t have any qualms about that.â?•)

Despite their air of celebrity, though, Keough and LaBeouf are quickly stripped of any presumed marquee sheen by Arnold, with both actors expertly disappearing into the rest of the awkward and irrepressible ensemble. And together, under Arnoldâ??s empathetic eye, the cast paints a devastating portrait of an oft-ignored generation, what might otherwise be dismissed as American trash.

Which is where the complications begin. Ever since *American Honey* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival this past spring, certain critical corners have worked hard to dismiss Arnoldâ??s work as mere poverty porn, a fetishization of rural misery. But that argument ignores both Arnoldâ??s own background and her artistic process.

Born to a 16-year-old single mother in the housing projects of Dartford, Kent, near London, Arnold grew up in much the same circumstances as the female protagonists across her filmography â?? isolated and desperate for an escape, of any sort. For *Wasp*â??s ZoÃ«, that exit plan comes in the form of a chance encounter with an old boyfriend. For *Fish Tank*â??s Mia, itâ??s her motherâ??s charming new boyfriend. For *American Honey*â??s Star, itâ??s LaBeoufâ??s charming predator. But for Arnold herself, it was, perhaps unbelievably, the dance floor: At 17, she won a spot at Londonâ??s Laban Dance Centre, which eventually led to her attending the American Film Institute in Los Angeles.

Simply put, Arnold knows just how important that rare combination of determination and luck are involved in escaping oneâ??s lot, and as a result, her work never resorts to sentimentality or exploitation. Itâ??s partly why she shoots in a 4:3 ratio, which looks like a square on the big screen: Arnoldâ??s films emphasize only the people in the frame, rather than their surroundings â?? which make for intensely personal narratives that are rooted in respect and emotional autonomy. Itâ??s a humanist method of filmmaking that separates the people from the societal clichÃ©s that might otherwise define them.

Plus, she does her research. â??I had only spent time in New York and L.A., which seem like islands to the rest of America, so I knew I had to explore,â?• Arnold says of her various road trips. â??It was kind of surprising, and one of the things that shocked me were the amount of drugs everywhere. I was going to areas looking for a certain kind of demographic, so it was a specific thing that I was doing, and I donâ??t want to say [drugs] were *everywhere*.

â??But these areas have been decimated by industry closings, shops are all closed,â?• she continues. â??Itâ??s a kind of time gone by, and you can see it because the buildings are still there. Thereâ??s plenty of people still living in these towns, but thereâ??s not much to do for work. Which is important â?? where do you go from there?â?•

Itâ??s a question that Arnold must now face as well, as her responsibilities for promoting, and at times defending, *American Honey* wind down after so many years. Like a good deal of her big-screen colleagues, she has dabbled in the world of premium television, recently directing three episodes of Amazonâ??s hit series *Transparent*. But that doesnâ??t mean sheâ??s abandoning the world of film, either.

â??It was quite freeing and liberating, to be working on something that was already there, that was not totally my responsibility toward the cast and the crew,â?• she says. â??But I still want to do my own work â?? I canâ??t help myself once one film is finished, I feel another gnawing away at me. I have to go after it. Itâ??s like an addiction.â?•

*Featured Photo: Andrea Arnold, right, writer/director of American Honey and cast member Sasha Lane. Director Andrea Arnold discovered American Honeyâ??s lead actress Sasha Lane by happy accident on a beach in Panama City, Fla.

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