

LAKEVIEW TERRACE

Directed by Neil LaBute
Produced by James Lassiter and Will Smith
Distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox
Released in 2008

This is the ultimate 'bad neighbor' movie. The scent of impending doom hangs over the story, and it seems capricious to expect Chris to win this most dangerous game, the only rule being, Loser Dies. The movie addresses, with frightening precision, race relations, manliness, infidelity, corruption, fear, and pride in a story that seems predictable but develops key situations in unexpected ways. For example, at the bachelor party we expect Chris will let loose, drink too much, and commit adultery, which Abel will exploit to seduce Lisa. And when Abel kills the burglar he sent over, maybe Chris will appreciate Abel more, and Abel, feeling guilty and relieved, will let go of his vendetta. But the cell phone's still in the bedroom!

Through the whole story a relentless wildfire is progressing toward their houses, which perfectly symbolizes the neighbors' growing hatred. We expect the fire to arrive just as their seething enmity yields to violence. But, again, the crisis is over before the fire arrives, and we come to see the fire as a welcomed purge that promises to erase this entire nightmare from memory.

Actor Patrick Wilson keeps up with Samuel L. Jackson, but it seems like an unfair pairing. However, this disparity in acting ability and capacity to intimidate benefits the story. Chris is out of his league, constantly out-manuevered and undercut. It has to, and does, seem hopeless.

But the movie scores by providing the villain a richer characterization than is typical. He's black, but conservative. In a twist on the expected norms, he's worried about white blood diluting black blood through intermarriage. He takes his family responsibilities seriously, but cannot relate to his daughter. He keeps his house immaculately clean to compensate for a world that seems lost to chaos. He's against debauchery but offers his house for a raunchy bachelor party (to stay tight with his fellow cops?...to annoy Chris?...who knows?). He's very mysterious, but one thing we're sure of is that Abel sees the lines between black and white passing away, and he's not happy about it.

The best twist comes with his brilliant handling of a domestic violence dispute. He avoids killing the Hispanic guy so to give the man another chance to face up to his responsibilities as a husband and father. In thanks, he's hit with a civil rights lawsuit and abandoned by his department. Not only does nobody know how good a cop he is, but nobody cares anymore. What we have as a consequence is one smart, strangely noble, embittered, and thoroughly unpredictable antagonist.

After seeing *Lakeview Terrace* it's once again apparent what a fine line we walk as a society. We are only protected from our oppressors when our protectors refuse to oppress. Each of us has no choice but to be a good neighbor...and buy a gun.