

B.J. Novak's directorial debut 'Vengeance' a smart social satire

By Katie Walsh
Tribune News Service

B.J. Novak opens his debut feature "Vengeance," which he wrote, directed and stars in, with a scene of acidic social commentary that lays the tone for the smart satire of contemporary media culture that ensues.

In a scene that targets the mating rituals of the urban-dwelling modern American cad, interspersed into the opening credits with an almost jarring violence, Ben (Novak), a writer for The New Yorker, and the unlikely, sometimes unlikeable, hero of "Vengeance," parries back and forth with his friend John (played by singer John Mayer) about their vapid dating lives.

As they debate the merits of seeing six women or three, question whether a cellphone contact labeled "Brunette Random House Party" refers to a woman met at a publishing event or a just a "random house party," and falsely declare that they're not afraid of emotional intimacy, Novak does something important with his character: he makes him a buffoon, first and foremost, in this bracing setup that allows him to carefully thread the needle on his American tale.

In "Vengeance," Novak sets his sights

on lampooning the big city media types who go chasing stories in middle America and return with observations from the "flyover states" that are usually condescending, preachy or inauthentic, and in doing so, he finds the humor, and something honest too.

Ben ends up in small-town Texas thanks to one of his numerous hookups. The family of aspiring musician Abilene (Lio Tipton), who has met a tragic end in what appears to be an accidental overdose death, is convinced that Ben was her serious boyfriend, and implores him to come to her funeral. When Abilene's brother, Ty (Boyd Holbrook), insists that his sister was murdered, and enlists Ben in his quest for revenge, his journalist ears perk up — this would be a great podcast. He quickly pitches it to a producer back in New York, Eloise (Issa Rae), and equipped with some Amazon flannel and the Voice Memos app, he sets out to tell the tale of a dead white girl, and of course, of America itself.

The way in which Ben finds himself embroiled in the mystery swirling around a stranger's death is reminiscent of the Serial podcast "S-Town," and it's clear that Novak knows this genre of "prestige journalism" well: when Ben speaks, even as we know we're supposed to chuckle at his purple descriptions of the Texas sunset, he nails the style and cadence, the slick language of a media-savvy writer. It's fun-



B.J. Novak stars as Ben Manalowitz in "Vengeance," a Texas-set film he also wrote and directed.

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ny, but it's also insightful too. Ben's work passes muster, which lends Novak's film merit, and another layer to the complexity of this movie.

"Vengeance" is fast and loose, moving quickly, the punchlines only landing before we're on to the next joke. The fantastic ensemble cast, including J. Smith-Cameron and Ashton Kutcher make meals out of their dialogue, and though some of the plot's twists and turns are a bit facile, and too heightened, it serves the mystery that churns the story along.

In "Vengeance," Novak's linguistic blade is simultaneously incisive and skewering. He indicts Ben's pretension

and the craven way he seeks to extract Abilene's story for his own gain, inspecting the media's role in the "culture wars," and the socially constructed divisions in our country. But the film manages to land somewhere between sour and sincere, as Ben makes meaningful connections with both Abi's family, and Abi's story, finding the heart after all. As Ben does, so does Novak, unearthing some profound truths, wrapped in comedy, about America right now, too.

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