

PRISONERS AND GUARDS

College kids play at lock-up in
The Stanford Prison Experiment

In 1971, Stanford professor Philip Zimbardo planned a two-week project that had such incredible results we're still talking about it more than 40 years later. On the surface, Zimbardo's idea was simple: Put college students into a simulated prison environment — some serving as prisoners, some as guards — and observe the psychological effects.

The Stanford Prison Experiment, Kyle Patrick Alvarez's new movie, adds another layer of performance to the situation: actors playing college students playing guards and prisoners. Billy Crudup adds his astonishing cheekbones to the proceedings as Dr. Zimbardo; Ezra Miller, scarily memorable as the titular teen of *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, takes the lead among the student prisoners. (You might also recognize Johnny Simmons, better known to some of us as Young Neil in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*.)

Alvarez presents the experiment straightforwardly; we get a bit of backstory, with Dr. Zimbardo, his colleagues and a man named Jesse (*True Blood*'s Nelsan Ellis), whose role is initially unclear. The students are screened; every one of them, when asked, says he would rather be a prisoner than a guard. Brought to the "prison" (a hallway in a Stanford building), their role-playing conversation is stiff and jokey — until the moment each realizes that a pretend prison is still a prison if you can't get up and leave. The guards take the same approach, until one (Michael



THINGS GET SEVERELY OUT OF HAND IN
THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

Anganaro), posturing like a character in a movie, takes center stage in a grotesque display of abused power.

Though it's cleverly filmed, making impressive use of small spaces and colors — the entire prison is a deceptively innocuous beige hallway; the researchers' lab is always dark, a little green, a little eerie — Alvarez's film is frustratingly vague on the science. What, exactly, did Zimbardo hope to learn from the experiment? What was his hypothesis? How did he arrive at the idea of the

simulation? Was he more interested in the reactions of the prisoners or the guards?

The reenactment is ugly and affecting, attention shifting from member to member among the excellent ensemble cast; Tim Talbott's script is streaked with an awareness of privilege that a lesser movie would have neglected. When the experiment rapidly devolves into terror and abuse of authority, the main question it raises is: Why hasn't anything changed? (*Bijou Metro*)

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