



ABOUT A BOY

A celestial abduction drives Jeff Nichols' *Midnight Special*

It is a peculiarity of art that its failures are often more moving, more profoundly beautiful, than its successes, especially when the artist failing is a great one. Perfection has a monolithic aspect, airtight and intimidating; it can leave us cold. Better, sometimes, the flaw, the frayed end, which reveals the Icarus burn of lofty ambitions. Humanity, you might say, is never more humane than when it strives and crashes.

In other words, I'd rather watch great filmmakers like Orson Welles and Terrence Malick botch it than see another middlebrow hack like Ridley Scott or Alejandro González Iñárritu nail it — the starting points are so radically different.

Same goes for writer-director Jeff Nichols, whose latest film, *Midnight Special*, is a wonderfully taut sci-fi thriller that eventually unravels under the strain of its own visionary ambitions. Nichols is a daring young filmmaker whose movies tackle quasi-religious subjects that are at once psychologically edgy and cosmically profound; his film *Take Shelter*, about a man haunted by apocalyptic visions that may or may not be prophetic, was one of the finest movies of 2011. Along with other young directors like Jonathan Glazer and M. Night Shyamalan (yes, I said it), Nichols seems to be pushing for a new mythology that better captures our modern crisis.

The story of *Midnight Special* is fable-simple, but Nichols spools it out as a series of reveals that leave you guessing at the truth. With the help of a renegade state trooper (Joel Edgerton), Roy (the entrancing Michael Shannon, somewhat wasted here) kidnaps his son, Alton Meyer (Jaeden Lieberher), from a Texas cult led by Calvin Meyer (Sam Shepard), who believes the boy holds mystical properties that will protect "the Ranch" from the coming end of the world.

Eluding law enforcement as well as cult members in mad pursuit, the two men drive like hell to get Alton to a particular place at a particular time, where he may or may not return to the celestial plane where he rightly belongs. Is this pale boy a savior? An extra-terrestrial? A victim of mass delusion? These and more questions arise, as do a series of dire complications, including a rendezvous with the boy's mother, Sarah Tomlin (Kirsten Dunst, always good).

The premise, which grapples all at once with such issues as end-times anxiety, federal conspiracies, quantum physics, parental bonds, alien abduction and how to best travel in the dark, is thrilling and brave. My former colleague Steve Wiecking described *Midnight Special* as "a smarter *Powder* or edgier *E.T.*, basically, but with an excellent cast," and I can't top that.

For me, the problem was that the cast is underused, the characters slightly undeveloped. The movie bites off so much that it remains, oddly, at the level of the theoretical and speculative; the breakneck pacing is interspersed with slower moments of emotional connection, but they aren't enough to balance out the grand themes that overwhelm the project. Unlike many, I actually rather liked the film's ending, if only because it risks grandiosity. And yet, because the characters seemed more placeholders than flesh-and-bone people, it didn't carry the weight it might have.

Despite its flaws, or perhaps because of them, I admire *Midnight Special* — admire more than like. Ultimately, I think the film is a misstep for Nichols, and although it's in the same thematic ballpark as *Take Shelter*, it doesn't achieve that movie's unnerving atmosphere of intimacy and claustrophobia. Still, it shows a talented director reaching for the sky, and I can't wait to see him reach out again. Even if he fails. (*Regal Cinemas*)

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