

SUBVERTING TROPES

Beach Rats' tragic gay figures

B*each Rats* is a lot of things in one film: beautiful, ominous, crushingly sad, tender, lonesome, scary, new and yet too familiar. Its contradictions are many, but central among them is the way it expands cinematic New York by showing us a part of it that feels like a lonely small town.

Frankie (Harris Dickinson, who I'd never have guessed was a Brit) has a face Captain America might envy. With a pack of friends, he drifts through summer days, avoiding his dying father, his growing-up sister, his strained mom. He meets a girl under the fireworks exploding at Coney Island; she's sexually aggressive, and he's ... unsure.

After his father dies, Frankie gets more sure — maybe

— and starts meeting the guys he finds online. He doesn't know what he likes, he tells them. But he's starting to figure something out.

Beach Rats sometimes feels like a documentary, like the camera is just following these guys around, waiting for something to happen. They don't say a lot; theirs is a language of grins and jeers, roughhousing and handball games.

Director Eliza Hittman and her cinematographer, Hélène Louvart, frame these young men so that you can't help but be aware of their physicality: naked torsos, strong hands, jutting jaws. They're lanky but taut; something is always *about* to happen, even if it almost never does.

Frankie is always hiding some part of himself, whether

behind a cocked baseball cap or an anonymous encounter. Hittman finds Frankie's uncertainty, his vulnerability, in his wide eyes and downturned face; he's kind of a gentleman and kind of a pill-stealing jerk, a post-high-school drifter whose path is a muddle in every direction.

Beach Rats builds toward conflict; there's a thread of potential violence that Hittman locates in the way the four young men fill narrow hallways, or in their hands, loose and ready. But is it just the coiled power of muscular young bodies, or does that threat of violence hover because we've come to expect it from a cinematic narrative about a closeted young man?

I was so certain about where this story was going that I watched part of the final act with my hands over my face, like it was a horror movie. And it is, in a way. *Beach Rats* subverts several tropes of summer-romance films: the screwing around, the uncertain sex, the meet-cute under the fireworks.

It's not a coming of age film; that would require something like resolution. Frankie's path is aimless but questing, and Dickinson gives a gentle, meandering performance, somehow both nuanced and expressionless within a single scene.

But can a film be moving and tired, graceful and trope-addled? Can it exist as a gracefully directed piece of art and simultaneously part of a worn-out cultural trend in which tragic gay figures exist primarily in ambiguous tales with little hope and less future?

As an exploration of toxic masculinity, a rarely seen side of New York, a teen's uncertainty, *Beach Rats* works beautifully, up to a point — but you can't take it out of the cultural context in which it appears. (*Broadway Metro*)

SEND IN THE CLOWN

Andy Muschietti's adaptation of Stephen King's It is all (carnival) bark and no bite

BY RICK LEVIN

I read Stephen King's *It* when it came out in 1986, and even if that's suddenly a hell of a long time ago, I do recall having a vague and queasy suspicion at the time that perhaps King, the undisputed master of modern horror, had at last jumped the shark — that the novel, despite its significant strengths, tended toward the bloated and formulaic, being regurgitative, cheap in a tawdry way, and somehow indicative of a macabre genius that was finally starting to parody and cannibalize itself.

Plus, there was that scene in the novel of the 13-year-old gangbang, but apparently nobody wants to talk about that bit of weirdness. It certainly isn't dealt with in the latest *It* adaptation, ably if somewhat generically directed by Andy Muschietti.

It's not that *It* is a bad film, per se; in fact, to all outward appearances, it's a solid, above-average Hollywood horror film: well acted, well shot and decently paced, if a tad long-winded. Pennywise, the evil clown that terrorizes the gang of children in the fictional town of Derry (set, unlike the novel, in the 1980s), is especially scary. His first appearance in the gutter is a hoot.

The problem for me was one of atmosphere and tone. There are all different kinds of scary, ranging from the giddy thrill of riding a rollercoaster to the terror

of having a cocked pistol pointed at your head, and everything in between. *It* falls distinctly, and disappointingly, in the former category, to the degree that its carnivalesque desire to scare you undermines its own claims to creepiness.

Nothing much feels at risk in this film. There's no real threat. The seatbelt is always on.

In other words, *It* never moves beyond its own movie-ness. Each incarnation of the supernatural evil stalking the town of Derry — from zombie-like lepers to spewing blood to howling deformed paintings come to life to spasmodic clowns — is meant to scare the audience rather than the kids on screen, to the extent that it never feels like anything is truly at stake.

Yes, the interactions of the "Losers Club," the young teens who band together to battle Pennywise, are touching and funny and sad, in the way *Stand By Me* (based on King's novella "The Body") was touching and funny and sad; the entire film is suffused in an overweening atmosphere of adolescent nostalgia — in the sounds and smells of summertime kids awakening to their own confused, conflicted sexuality, limning on the terrors of adulthood, all under the metaphorically profound threat of an annihilating presence that brings your deepest fears to life.

But, as director, Muschietti treats it all so orthodoxly, so by-the-numbers, it's difficult to tell whether he's trying to please King fans or simply avoid offending them. The result is a film whose finest elements are lost in an epic sprawl that tries to cover too much ground — sort of like the novel itself. *It* can't decide whether it wants to be *Nightmare on Elm Street* or *Stand By Me*, and it ends up being a little bit of both but not much of either, in a jack-of-all-trades way.

Let me add, in all fairness, that you might not want to take my word for it. Among the eight people I watched the film with — smart folks, all of them — I was definitely alone in my lukewarm response to the movie. They loved it. Seeking approval, I suggested to my friends that *It* might indeed work better if viewed as a sort of anarcho-syndicalist metaphor for the way Trump has terrified the country: You know, President Pennywise, making your every fear come true, and killing us all off one by one. Hope definitely does not float.

That got a chuckle, but mostly I was relegated to the outskirts of good opinion, where I likely belong — a reject who can't even get into the "Loser's Club." *It* figures, and *It* only goes to show. Oh well, fuck *It*. (*Cinemark 17, Regal Valley River*)