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The Collector

A surprisingly stylish and confident high-concept thriller.

By JOHN ANDERSON

With both feet planted firmly on the sticky accelerator of the torture-porn vehicle, "The Collector" is a surprisingly stylish and confident high-concept thriller in which a burglar breaks into a family home already invaded by a super-sadistic serial killer; bloodletting and mood lighting ensue. Hyper-violent slicer-dicer takes its time getting to the dismemberments, disembowelments and death by bear trap, but the execution, so to speak, is first-rate. Pic shows utter disregard for auds' gastrointestinal well-being and yielded about \$3.6 million in its opening weekend, but style points and fan buzz could prompt sequels.

Slaughter cinema can be divided into two pools of thought, the Freudian vs. the Manichean. The former includes "Psycho" (Mom did it!) and "Friday the 13th" (it was those rotten kids!). Helmer Marcus Dunstan and his co-writer/producing partner Patrick Melton have chosen the other side of the debate, dispensing with apologetic psychology altogether and portraying their Collector as a purist, as in pure evil.

It's scarier that way: There's never an explanation for why the captive man bursts out of a mysterious box during the opening credits, or why the box was there to begin with. Or why, shortly thereafter, the Chase family is already being subjected to unspeakable terror when their house is broken into -- again -- by an itinerant carpenter, Arkin (Josh Stewart), who had been working there in the afternoon. Why the Chases? Because, as Edmund Hillary might have said, they were there. What Arkin has to decide is whether to get the hell out or try and save the family. All things considered, he doesn't choose well.

There are a certain number of preliminaries (a surprising number, given the target aud) before the commencement of Butchery 101. Arkin has a daughter and an ex-wife, who owes money to loan sharks. He may seem like a stoner (Stewart actually imbues his character with a generous sense of cosmic resignation), but he's otherwise a decent guy: To pay off his ex's debt before her midnight deadline, he agrees to break into the Chase house, where he knows an uncut ruby of enormous size is waiting in the upstairs safe.

What he doesn't expect to find is a house that's been rigged up by the Satan-meets-"Hostel" version of Rube Goldberg -- knife-studded chandeliers, staircases bristling with spikes and nails, and a machete poised, a la guillotine, to swing down from the ceiling. There are also a number of Alexander Calder-inspired arrangements involving fish hooks.

It's a rather ingenious series of tortures-to-be, seemingly characteristic of the Dunstan-Melton aesthetic and taste for perversity: In one of our first looks at Mrs. Chase (Andrea Roth), she applies a syringe full of Botox to a wrinkle on her forehead: The audience cringes, and it's a pretty good joke -- especially in light of what happens later -- about just what it takes to get an audience of

horror fans to recoil. Judging by "The Collector," it's a very tiny needle, or a bucketload of gore.

Production values are first-rate, especially the sound design, and lenser Brandon Cox's virtually light-free shooting.

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