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Posted: Tue., Mar. 16, 2010, 4:41pm PT

Brotherhood

A Roslyn Prods. presentation of a Three Folks Pictures production in association with Hunting Lane Films and Instinctive Film. Produced by Chris Pollack, Steve Hein, Tim O'Hair, Jason Croft. Executive producers, Jamie Patricof, Kevin Iwashina, Darryn Welch, Chris Ouwinga. Directed by Will Canon. Screenplay, Canon, Doug Simon.

Frank - Jon Foster
Adam - Trevor Morgan
Mike - Arlen Escarpeta
Kevin - Lou Taylor Pucci
Bean - Jesse Staccato
Emily - Jennifer Spies
Graham - Luke Sexton
Jackson - Chad Holbrook

By JOE LEYDON

Ingeniously constructed and propulsively paced, "Brotherhood" achieves the sweaty-palmed intensity of classic film noir while demonstrating just how speedily a very bad situation can metastasize into a worst-case scenario after a college fraternity hazing takes a deadly serious turn. First-time feature helmer Will Canon drives his actors on a virtually nonstop full-court press from first scene to final fade-out, only occasionally pausing for a dab of backstory or a burst of black comedy to give the players — and the audience — a fleeting breather. Canny marketing could drive this well-crafted indie beyond the fest circuit and into megaplexes.

Canon authoritatively sets the overall tone and establishes the central characters in his pic's 13-minute pretitile sequence, as demanding frat prez Frank (Jon Foster), evidencing all the browbeating expertise of a Marine D.I., orders intimidated pledges to prove their worth by robbing convenience stores.

The pledges are being punk'd: They don't know that, each time one is dropped off at a store, another fraternity brother will halt the guy before he actually attempts a stick-up. Trouble is, one frat boy, Kevin (Lou Taylor Pucci), is at the wrong store at the wrong time, and winds up getting shot and wounded by an armed store clerk.

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So it's back to the frat house, where Adam (Trevor Morgan), a pledge who gradually emerges as the pic's protagonist, demands that Frank call an ambulance or, better still, rush Kevin to a hospital. But Frank nixes both requests, insisting he can find a way to ameliorate the situation -- and, he hopes, stop Kevin from bleeding to death -- without alerting the cops and risking jail time. The other frat brothers follow Frank's lead -- from force of habit, of course, but also to avoid any penalty for being not-so-innocent bystanders.

Despite his grave misgivings and mounting anxiety, Adam bows to Frank's will. He even accompanies a brother back to the convenience store to remove anything that might tie them to the shooting. Unfortunately, this entails abducting Mike (Arlen Escarpeta) -- the armed clerk who just happens to be Adam's former high school classmate -- a working-class African-American who's rightly wary of smug white frat boys, and appears unwilling to take part in a cover-up.

One thing leads to another; actions trigger consequences. Meanwhile, Frank seeks help from one former frat member, and tries to turn away another, as Kevin's condition deteriorates. Tempers flare, power shifts, uninvited guests intrude and cars inconveniently collide.

Time and again throughout "Brotherhood," Canon and co-scriptwriter Doug Simon catch the audience off guard with an enjoyably jolting twist that's all the more satisfying (and, in many cases, darkly comical) because it's the payoff for something planted earlier. Indeed, the nasty surprise of the denouement neatly ties up a dangling thread that, by that particular point in the film, most viewers may have forgotten about.

Canon enhances the claustrophobic suspense through shrewd use of spatial relationships within the widescreen frame of Michael Fimognari's HD lensing. Standouts in an exceptionally strong cast include Foster, playing Frank as a despot under pressure who tamps down frantic self-doubts through sheer force of will; Morgan, who teasingly indicates that Adam may not have it in him to do the right thing; and Escarpeta, who compellingly conveys Mike's alternating currents of desperation and hostility.

"Brotherhood" defies easy labeling -- it's kinda-sorta "Animal House" meets "Detour," though even that doesn't do it justice -- but its uniqueness could prove to be a major selling point. Better still, this impressive indie, filmed on location in Arlington, Texas, should definitely attract attention for those involved on both sides of the camera.

Camera (Technicolor, widescreen, HD), Michael Fimognari; editor, Josh Schaeffer; music, Dan Marocco; production designer, Eric Whitney; costume designer, Leila Heise; sound (Dolby Digital), Brad Harper; associate producers, Valerie Watts Meraz, Susan O'Leary; assistant director, Don Thompson; casting, Michelle Morris Gertz. Reviewed at SXSW Film Festival (competing), March 14, 2010.

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