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“Tell your audience the stories they expect, just in ways they don’t necessarily expect...” I can almost hear these same words spoken as if it were yesterday, the wise counsel of a former screenwriting guru those many moons ago.

What you’ve just read above appears to be a dictum filmmaker Greg Derochie has religiously heeded in his indie smash *Solitary*, carrying us — and his script — through a two genre spin cycle right until the very end. This is a filmmaker who knows how to stretch emotions to snapping point, tugging so hard, as Derochie does, at your fragile heartstrings that your ventricles will threaten to go stone cold numb or burst. Finally...the release comes...blood goes rushing back to your head as you’re suddenly reminded that you’re right where you left off, watching the film on that very same device you began with ninety minutes ago; only now, you’re forever changed. And how? Derochie has morphed two genres together in his own version of the *Kansas City Shuffle*.

*Solitary* is a film I won’t be forgetting soon. That is true because Casting Director Sherrie Henderson sifted through dozens of players to find the absolute optimal cast to breathe life into this handful of roles and the chosen actors fully committed themselves to making Derochie’s (plus writing partner Charles Scalfani) script so viscerally real. *Solitary* hit home so resoundingly so, it smarted in places a script of its genre honestly shouldn’t have.

We kick things off with Sara (newcomer Amber Jaeger), a woman so irreversibly smitten with agoraphobia that she loses consciousness at the mere prospect of leaving her home’s safe confines. Next, we introduce her husband Mark (Scottish actor Kieron Elliott), a construction industry sales agent by day and loving husband for the day’s remains. They’re preparing for an anniversary road trip to Santa Barbara. Mark takes his leave for the day, and — bam! — we have our inciting incident almost gift wrapped for the occasion. Sara’s commences a series of panic attacks which become more pronounced as the narrative progresses. Unable to restrain the worst of her anxieties at the prospect of Mark’s unannounced absence, she descends into a myriad of inescapable emotional tailspins that finally demand medical attention.

Observing her sibling’s abject despair, enter Sara’s nurse sister Gina (Kristine Sullivan) who suggests that it might be a wise idea to undergo several head-shrinking sessions with her hospital colleague Dr. Seymour Reznik (played with eerie aplomb by Andrew Qamar). If only to quell the mounting maelstrom that’s beginning to stew in Sara’s addled mind. Reznik wends his way to Sara’s house and together they begin to sift through the tangled tentacles of Sara’s hazy memories to eke out some semblance of Sara’s recollection of the day Mark disappeared. Over several intensive *mano and mano* sessions — aided by Reznik’s cutting-edge use of technology — the pair appear to be making a breakthrough. But it only appears to be the case, as their meandering progress is more akin to the one-step forward, two steps back variety.

Meanwhile, Sara is visited by a pair of snooping detectives (B. Anthony Cohen and Brian Spangler- Campbell) who have been dispatched to her home to investigate what increasingly is looking like a case of foul play. Sara reluctantly goes along with their brash interrogations, but problems arise the instant these two begin to suspect Sara of involvement in her husband's disappearance. It all hinges on her sister Gina coupled with the dangling carrot of a two million dollar insurance payout in the event of Sara's demise. None of this makes any sense to our protagonist, who, at least when Mark was around, was none the wiser. If Mark seemingly intentionally rigged his disappearance in order to orchestrate a midnight run of some sort, Sara's marriage for the past few years would be nothing but a brazen sham. She can't bring herself to accept that possibility, which is what pits her in such dire psychological straits.

Over repeated one-on-one talks with Dr. Reznik and in the wake of a number of visits by Detectives Gibson (Cohen) and Hanks (Spangler-Campbell), Mark's whereabouts are no nearer to being discovered than when we began and Sara suffers the brunt of all this. Repeatedly stymied and terrorized by her agoraphobia, Sara is forced into increasingly desperate positions in order to reclaim her sanity that thrusts her into mounting precarious situations as our story progresses. Nestled within Sara's gilded cage — her home — lies a perpetually locked room. We never quite learn what lives behind its doors, though Sara is convinced it's a section of her and Mark's house that no soul should ever venture into, at least not in their right minds.

Sara — contrary to the gentle (and continued) appeals by Gina and Dr. Reznik — refuses to even consider making her way inside and so the door remains barred to the outside world. That it remains continually sealed nags and rankles. The big mystery in *Solitary* is how exactly did Sara get to be this way? And if she's been this way for a while, why has her apparent condition gone so mercilessly untreated — or perhaps better put, mistreated?

Sara is a particularly attractive woman who seems to be entirely physically intact. She communicates lucidly to her psychiatrist — although with pained recall — and while there's some simmering animosity between Gina and Sara none of the above easily explains the actions of the person we witness on-screen engaging in this epic personal struggle to simply make her way through the day in one piece. As we plunge into this story, the genius of the Derochie & Scalfani script surfaces...though as much as it pains me to reveal this, I cannot tell you how it ends. ;-)

Absolute must-raves about this film:

**Cast:** with a lesser-skilled, less charismatic, and exceedingly less dominant cast, I can see *Solitary* turning into a well-shot, tightly-scripted picture that does little more than entangle itself in the bramble patch of the indie thousands, rather than become the memorable genre-obliterating feature it turns out to be. As I'd mentioned to the director-co-writer-producer-editor (not to mention all-around stellar visual effects guy and fellow Canuck!) Greg Derochie, his lead actress Amber Jaeger was definitely one of the indie finds of '09. Kieron Elliott is true to type as Sara's dashing co-lead to her feminine

magnetism, with stentorian actor Andrew Qamar chillingly effective as the overly-obliging-for-his-own good Dr. Reznik, nothing short of fully convincing in being one of the creepiest shrinks around. I'm going out on a limb to write that it's the actors who have succeeded in selling *Solitary*, causing it to hover way above the indie slag heap.

**Production Values:** this now marks the second (or third?) occasion I've sat through an entire indie shot with Red One technology, and I'll be gosh darned if I cast another disparaging remark about that camera ever again! All it took Derochie and co. was \$50k, Derochie's L.A. area home, and the assistance of a handful of carefully-selected film industry collaborators into making *Solitary* the stupendous end product it is, and I'm a changed man because of it. The frame boasted those delectably familiar sharp lines of 35mm — minus the burdensome expense — and the picture's focus puller rightly deserves an award for keeping Amber Jaeger's pained expressions constantly in vivid perspective. This shooting technology is what gave *Solitary* its needed gravitas and it was a wise choice by the Formation Films unit to go down that road.

**Sound Design & Soundtrack:** always bear in mind that the actors aren't playing to the soundtrack which we viewers ultimately hear. Therefore the reality these professionals succeed in conjuring up only deepens my appreciation for what actors do for a living. Composer Andrew Keresztes opted for rousing orchestral tones, coupled with par-for-the-course frisson sounds emblematic of the thriller/mystery genre. The final scene might have you moved to tears as our universe — once chaotically and rudely interrupted — is restored back to its former steady state. All of this comes about courtesy of the music.

I'm casting my PMD vote for *Solitary* as precisely the brand of narrative I positively swoon over at film festivals. It's now patently clear to me — as it should be to others — why Greg Derochie's film didn't encounter resistance on the distribution front as other indies seem to regrettably experience daily. The man really knows what he's doing on a film set, and I hope he continues to grace our screens with his works in coming months.