Film Review: ‘A Kind of Murder’

Nick Schager Film Critic @nschager 3
Variety

Andy Goddard finds echoes of 'Strangers on a Train' in this stylish adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's 'The Blunderer.'

Crime doesn’t pay, and in “A Kind of Murder,” neither does fantasizing about it. Adapting acclaimed suspense author Patricia Highsmith’s 1954 novel “The Blunderer,” director Andy Goddard and screenwriter Susan Boyd chart the doom that befalls a couple of men whose spouses, in quick succession, turn up dead at the same out-of-the-way Northeast rest stop. While thrills are mitigated by convoluted plotting and suspect character behavior, the film’s uniquely bleak twist on classic noir conventions is enlivening. Its theatrical fate is limited, yet finding subsequent cult-following favor with genre aficionados isn’t beyond a reasonable doubt.

Highsmith's novel is reminiscent of her debut smash "Strangers on a Train," in that it details the intersection of two men with murder on their minds. Rare bookstore owner Kimmel (Eddie Marsan) is a reserved loner whose wife has recently been slain at roadside diner Harry's Rainbow Grill. Detective Lawrence (Vincent Kartheiser) eyes him as the prime suspect, though his potential guilt is also of interest to architect Walter Stackhouse (Patrick Wilson), who when not dealing with his unhappy real-estate agent wife Clara (Jessica Biel) — whose pinched expressions and pulled-back hairstyle speak to her depression — clips newspaper articles of murders as possible inspiration for the mystery-magazine short stories he writes in his spare time.

Relocated from the book's 1950s setting to the early '60s, "A Kind of Murder" revels in the era's clothing (dapper suits, wide-brimmed hats, even wider-bottomed dresses) and decor, which is drenched in heavily suggestive lurid reds. Walter soon begins an affair with young Greenwich Village bohemian Ellie (Haley Bennett), and their tryst sends the jealous, desperate Clara to attempt suicide. Worse, after divorce becomes a topic of conversation, Clara mysteriously disappears on her way to visiting her hypochondriac mother. When she's discovered dead the next day near Harry's Rainbow Grill — shortly after Walter searched for her in that very spot — Detective Lawrence grows intensely suspicious about Walter's role in her demise.

Boyd's script lays out this twisty-turn action in somewhat bumpy fashion, and it's occasionally difficult to comprehend exactly why Walter — who also visits Kimmel before Clara's death — continually behaves in a manner so obviously destined to make himself look shady. It's a testament to Goddard's direction that the film, also embellished with cross-cutting between the past and present, keeps its various strands lucid. His color scheme is sometimes a tad too on-the-nose, but his wintry metro-NYC visuals have a borderline snow-globe unreality to them, and his framing ably conveys the constricting circumstances in which Walter finds himself.

Biel and Bennett fulfill their light/dark archetypes with relative aplomb, the latter seducing Walter by crooning "I Can't Escape From You" in a licentious subterranean jazz club. But it's Wilson who keeps the knotty proceedings from devolving into an unholy tangle. Locating a balance between arrogance, entitlement, paranoia and defiance — his mantra becoming, "I didn't do anything wrong" — the actor embodies Walter as a mess of contradictions, all of them exacerbated by his fear that his situation, nominally created by one dumb decision after another, is perhaps really the byproduct of a subconscious desire to be rid of his wife.

Wilson's robust, rock-solid performance (typified by the confident way he lights his endless chain of smokes) is complemented by that of Marsan as a quiet, mousy man with the eyes of a viper, and their few scenes together are charged with a mixture of distrust and kindred-spirit admiration. Boasting a buzz cut and a gruff, smug attitude, Kartheiser's detective strikes the film's only atonal chords, coming across as mostly a sketchy type designed to fulfill basic narrative requirements.

As is often true of such stories, "A Kind of Murder" climaxes in dark, dank corridors where a killer's pursuit of a potential victim is projected in shadow along cold, starkly illuminated walls. There's nothing particularly novel about the who-what-where-when-why of Goddard's finale. However, in its swirling deathbed dream of ruminations, feelings and written words, it expands upon noir's trademark fatalism, implying that doom befalls not only those foolish enough to try to change their lot in life, but also those thoughtless enough to think about doing so in the first place.