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Jam (2006)

Reviewed By Jay Seaver
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"Nobody thought to turn around?"

★★★★ (Worth A Look)

SCREENED AT THE 2006 BOSTON FILM FESTIVAL: Before I saw this movie, I admit, I was ready to lead with a snarky "after a 'Crash' inevitably comes a 'Jam'" comment, which is just super-tacky because I haven't even SEEN "Crash". Of course, "Jam"'s producers probably aren't likely to complain too much about their film getting mentioned in the same sentence as an Oscar-winner.

It initially appears that *Jam* is going to spend a lot of time on race, too, as the auto accident that causes the titular traffic jam is between black cellist Lorraine (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) and a white father/son pair, Ted (William Forsythe) and Josh (Dan Byrd). Soon after, dark-skinned hippie chick Lilac (Gina Torres) is given static by white yuppies Gary (Jonathan Silverman) and Judy (Julie Claire) while trying to find help for her extremely pregnant partner Rose (Mariah O'Brien). They eventually wind up in an RV stolen by Curt (Christopher Amitrano) and Jerry (David DeLuise). Also caught in the traffic jam are Dale (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) and his kids Robert (Skyler Gisondo) and Brianna (Marissa Blanchard), bride-to-be Amy (Amanda Detmer) and her bridesmaids Jen (Elizabeth Bogush) and Stephanie (Amanda Foreman), and older married couple Mick (Alex Rocco) and Ruby (Tess Harper).

Rather than spending the majority of its time on hot-button issues, *Jam* is mostly concerned with parent-child relationships. The film is set on Father's Day, and the stories include expectant parents, divorced parents on their custodial weekend, grown children missing a deceased parent, a father and son at odds, etc., etc. Even the thread about the bride with cold feet involves her wanting to start a family. It's a theme that holds the film together without being painfully obvious about it; nobody ever says "man, we've all got daddy issues!"

The cast is full of familiar faces, mostly from television, doing what they do best. Marianne Jean-Baptiste is the calm, centering influence she has been ever since coming to American attention in *Secrets & Lies*; David DeLuise is the not-so-bright but affable guy he's come to specialize in. The trio of Amanda Detmer, Amanda Foreman, and Elizabeth Bogush play off each other very well, feeling like people so used to being friends that they don't realize how much they've grown to dislike each other. Detmer shares a number of scenes with Jeffrey Dean Morgan, and they develop a nifty antagonistic chemistry right off the bat. Also of special note is Gina Torres, whom fans of action-oriented TV series have loved for nearly a decade and may, in *Lilac*, have finally found the role that grabs the attention of a wider audience.

Many of director (and producer/co-writer) Craig Serling's recent credits have been as an editor on various unscripted television programs. While it's easy to reflexively bash those shows, it actually turns out to be a solid training ground for an ensemble drama like this. Both jobs involve introducing the audience to a lot of people in very little time and then

balancing those characters evenly, trying to avoid repetition even though they're all doing more or less the same thing. Often in an ensemble piece, some characters are more equal than others or many seem like filler; Shipley, by and large, manages to avoid that.

What shortcomings the film has likely come about due to the tight shooting schedule. During the Q&A, Shipley seemed proud of how many scenes were shot in just one take, but sometimes that may have happened more out of necessity more than complete satisfaction. An independent film like this casts familiar faces by being able to get them in and out quickly, and if you've only got a central character for two or three days (how long Detmer said she was on set), you may just take what you can get. In particular, the Gary & Judy scenes don't really work, and Forsythe plays much better off Ms. Jean-Baptiste than he does off Dan Byrd.

It occurs to me that "Jam" may have a double meaning, in that aside from depicting a traffic jam, it's a chance for many fine character actors to get together and, well, jam. None really take the lead, but supporting each other is what these guys do best.

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