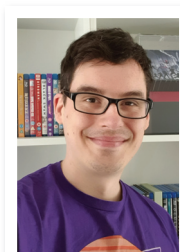


Weapons



***Weapons* is the new movie from Barbarian director Zach Cregger. It stars Julia Garner as Justine Gandy, a primary school teacher who discovers one morning that 17 of the 18 children in her class have disappeared overnight.**

The trailers and marketing for *Weapons* promised a fairly straightforward horror-mystery, perhaps something akin to *The Ring* or *The Conjuring*. What we actually get is something far stranger, and much harder to define. Perhaps that should be expected from the man who brought us *Barbarian*, which is known for its shocking mid-movie change in direction. Even so, *Weapons* is wilder than anyone could have guessed.

To begin with, at least, it plays out as expected. We meet Garner's caring but troubled teacher; Alex (Cary Christopher), the one boy in her class who did not inexplicably flee from his home at 2:17 am that morning; Archer Graff (Josh Brolin), the abrasive and unpredictable father of one of the missing children; Marcus (Benedict Wong), the friendly but strict school principal; and Paul (Alden Ehrenreich), a policeman and Justine's ex-boyfriend.

Around the time we begin to focus on Archer, and see his eerie, heavily symbolic dreams, the movie starts to drift into strange territory, and once Paul has an encounter with a twitchy junkie (Austin Abrams), things take a turn for the absurd. The tension of the first part of the movie is broken, and things become almost comedic. This continues for the rest of the film's runtime, with genuine suspense and sickening gore contrasted with over-the-top, almost slapstick humour.

While this should probably mean that the film is a tonally, inconsistent mess, it somehow works. The horror, even interspersed with gut-busting comedy,



remains scary. Likewise, the funny moments are genuinely funny, even when they involve unpleasant, frightening or sickening things. That this movie can straddle genres and moods so well is testament to the writing and directing of Cregger.

Plaudits also have to be given to the large ensemble cast, who make every moment, no matter how strange or wacky, feel real. Garner, Brolin and Wong, in particular, are consistently engaging and believable, regardless of what is happening around them. Cary Christopher is the film's emotional centre, with his Alex Lilly being a genuinely tragic character. Even in the face of all of *Weapons*' insanity, he remains sympathetic and heartbreaking.

The standout of the cast, however, is veteran character actress Amy Madigan, as Alex's eccentric aunt Gladys. Without giving anything away, she is *Weapons* in a nutshell - bizarre, menacing and hilarious, often all at once.

There are a few frustratingly unanswered questions in *Weapons*, and the pacing can be a little inconsistent. Likewise, the jarring shifts in tone will put off some viewers. But for those who can appreciate cinema that is bold, original and experimental, this is a real gem; a mid-budget studio horror film that's not a remake or a sequel, that doesn't rely on tired genre clichés, and delivers a truly unforgettable, one-of-a-kind viewing experience.