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Over the GW (2007)



Director: [Nick Gaglia](#),
Starring: George Gallagher, Kether Donohue, Albert Insinnia, Nicholas Serra, Justin Swain, G.R. Johnson
Length: 77 minutes
Rated: NR

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We're Here To Help You

by [Adam Barnick](#)
 reviewed: 2007-11-25

Tony (George Gallagher) stumbles through a drug haze, with his mother helping him down the street. What was supposed to be a shopping trip begins with a strange meeting at a nondescript building..a moment later Tony is brutally forced to the floor, strip searched, and bullied into signing what amounts to an incarceration form. Tricked into a rehab center, Tony's well-meaning mother leaves him there feeling this is the best thing to help him clean up his life. Far from following any proven approach to treatment, the place borders on a militaristic cult; and what should have been a monthlong stay spirals into years.

This psychological torture masquerading as discipline and "tough love" consist of sleeping 4-5 to a mattress (or a section of floor), being led around like misbehaving pets, being put in chokeholds and literally sat on for hours until one promises to be "compliant," not being allowed to read(!), and apparently this is a watered-down version of what director Nick Gaglia endured in his teenage stint in the rehab center(the now-defunct KIDS of North Jersey); the story is true, and uncomfortably personal.

Tony and eventually, his sister Sofia are forced and then choose to remain, continually threatened with the idea that survival and sobriety is only possible inside their new home. Even teens with weight problems and average sexual urges are trapped here, repeatedly told they can't have any future contact with loved ones or former friends who could threaten their new states of mind.

A Slamdance 2007 discovery, Over the GW is not a 'horror' movie per se- though your skin will be crawling at points through the film. 24-year old director Gaglia shows admirable maturity and restraint in his storytelling, and would be equally effective helming a tale that didn't stem from personal history, I feel. Particularly noteworthy is his skill with actors and casting; performances are top-notch, across the board. Kether Donahue and George Gallagher both excel as the imprisoned siblings; Gallagher's fearless and layered performance is a confident film debut. Albert Insinnia, as the center's director, exudes snake-oil salesman charm and menace, all the while projecting genuine concern for the 'flock' and an unshakeable belief that his (unlicensed) methods are the kids' only way out of their downward spiral. Admirably, neither he nor the (also effectively portrayed) staff, consisting of former program grads, come off as one-note monsters even though they're frighteningly effective. The nontraditional screenplay has a great flair for natural dialogue; if large parts of the film weren't improvised, they certainly feel like it.

Gaglia brings a striking visual sense to the film, stylization that's narrative-appropriate, akin to a surreal documentary: Long lenses and close-ups, jittery handheld, blurred shifts in

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focus and a vibrant, sickly color palette create a subjective claustrophobia that perfectly mirrors the states the characters are in. The fractured yet sound narrative intentionally gives little sense of proper time passing..what day or season is it? It's borderline startling the first time we step outside the clinic and hear natural sounds again, and can see something besides concrete walls and pulsing fluorescent lights. The insertion of interviews with Tony's parents and grandparents, docu-style, do fill in some narrative gaps but feel slightly jarring from their infrequency. The story's told well enough that the additional support might not be needed.

This cautionary tale of rehabs gone wrong never comes across as didactic or a bitter victim's expose' story, though the director certainly earned the right to do so if he'd wanted. It's one of the strongest no-budget debuts in some time. I look forward to seeing what he, Donahue and Gallagher do next, together or separate.

Seventh Art Releasing has GW in regional release in the US; visit the film's website at www.overthegw.com for more information.

Adam Barnick

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