

As a suspense film, "Dead Calm" hits the mark

By **JAMES DEAN**
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One review I read for the new Australian thriller *Dead Calm* called it "a combination of 'Alien' and 'In Cold Blood.'" Have you noticed how people have been doing that recently? "Lean on Me" was described by one critic as "part 'High Noon,' part 'Rocky.'" What this means is anyone's guess. Maybe it means that the lead character is a sort of Gary Cooper-Sylvester Stallone type fighting for justice when the odds are stacked against him, but what it suggests is that the reviewer was thinking, "This movie sucks; I'd much rather be watching 'High Noon' or at least 'Rocky' right now."

Well, "Alien" and "In Cold Blood" are two of my favorite films, and

there are a lot of films I'd quite happily walk out of to watch them. Not "Dead Calm," however. Despite its faults, it accomplishes what it sets out to do in a very commendable fashion. Except for a few bodies floating around, it didn't remind me one bit of "Alien" or "In Cold Blood."

If anything, "Dead Calm" could be described as Hitchcockian, but then isn't *everything* that is even vaguely suspenseful? Nevertheless, "Dead Calm" is one of the most tense films I've seen in quite a while. The story is centered completely around three characters and is set in the middle of the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Australia.

John and Rae Ingraham have just lost their only child in a car accident and have decided to go

out onto the high seas for a while to help get over the shock. After a few weeks in solitude, they sight a large boat in the distance that looks like it may be in a spot of trouble. Which, it turns out, it is, since the only surviving crew member, Hughie, rows up to their boat in a frantic state and spills the beans about what happened.

As in any good suspense movie, the stranger is a real threat. Neither the characters nor the audience trusts him. Nothing about Hughie is certain. He could be lying through his teeth about the food poisoning that has wiped out his fellow crew members. He could be lying when he says that his ship is gradually sinking and that he would definitely have drowned had the kind Ingrahams not turned up in time. Added to

that, they are all in the middle of the sea. The Ingrahams can't pack him off to the nearest trauma center. They are stuck with him, and he really is a bit strange.

While Hughie is recuperating, and because we are all just a little bit inquisitive about what really happened on the sinking ship, John rows over to check it out. He discovers some distinctly unpleasant things including, as I've already mentioned, some nasty floating corpses. He races back to the comfort of his own ship. But before he can get on board, Hughie, who has since awoken, takes over the ship and leaves without John. The rest of the film is Rae's battle with Hughie to get back and find her husband before he is consumed by the commanding sea.

The fact that the film remains suspenseful for an hour and 40 minutes with just the three lead characters and the same setting is a pretty worthy achievement. The story is fairly simple, though sometimes a bit slow. But because of the depth of the characters and the tense mood that is created between them, the film is permanently fascinating. More specifically, the three characters, especially Hughie, are not normal movie characters. John and Rae are a fairly unremarkable couple all in all, but because of the way each of them reacts to the trauma of losing their child, they seem slightly mysterious.

Most of all, Hughie is an extremely difficult character to pin down. He is in a constant sweat, he dances to guitar music on his Walkman, and he doesn't seem to care about what has just happened on his boat — although it supposedly upset him so much — or about leaving John behind to die. He has no real direction or motives for his actions. He could be perfectly normal or seriously psychotic. He just won't give away which he is. Not wanting to trust him, we are forced to assume the latter.

The tension is enhanced by the splitting up of the characters. When we are on the boat with Hughie and Rae, we wonder what is happening to John, and vice

versa. The characters are so well developed that we are drawn to caring about their fate and judging their actions. We support John and Rae all the way through, but when they resort to destroying Hughie without even uttering a word to each other, we feel the weight on our consciences as they do on theirs.

The three leads are excellent. The only recognizable face is that of Sam Neill ("A Cry in the Dark"). As John, Neill has the ability to seem suspicious even in the most unsuspecting situations. You want to trust him, but you can't. And when he turns out to be all right, you feel bad about it. This trait works perfectly for his character. As Rae, Nicole Kidman grows in stature with her character. She deals with the psychological torment of Rae very well, and makes the increasing strength that Rae finds to overcome Hughie seem plausible. Even when she turns nasty a la Sigourney Weaver, she doesn't overdo the mean looks. As Hughie, Billy Kane does for the film what Ray Liotta did as Ray in "Something Wild." He makes his character completely unpredictable. Consequently, he creates a power for Hughie that seems almost superhuman, and is quite terrifying.

Despite the simplicity of its setting and plot, "Dead Calm" is a beautifully made film. It uses the sea (which I've always found creepy) very well, with the help of some exquisite photography. There are plenty of faults: a gratuitous dog death, a few slow moments, and a rushed ending. However, they only detract slightly from the overall effect. Although there are plenty of unanswered questions at the end that arise from the mysterious nature of the characters, the film still works because it is meant to be strange.

More importantly, "Dead Calm" succeeds as a suspense thriller. In an age when such tripe as "Frantic" and "Tequila Sunrise" are the only films from that genre on offer, and are given good reviews because of it, it is good to see a thriller that really leaves an impression.



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