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The Instrument

A Magister Prods. presentation in association with Princeton U. and Maryland Institute College of Art. Produced, directed, written by Adam Nemett.

With: Hilton Carter, David Hittson, Heather Iandoli, Ajay Kapur, Jamie Kassel, Jose Maertz, Taryn Wayne, Richard Kalter, Barry Nemett.

By ROBERT KOEHLER

The Instrument" is a slyly ambitious if only slightly realized post-modern play on college documentary filmmaking. Hatched by writer-producer-director Adam Nemett under the auspices of Princeton U., result is a multi-disciplinary effort by Nemett and his father Barry at the Maryland Institute College of Art. Pic is framed as a docu on music students who must live and create together for a month per the will of a Harry Partch-like music maker. Pure fest fodder, this slice of semi-underground post-grad imagination will perk up the college pic circuit.

Student filmmaker Pallo Zo (Hilton Carter) starts a documentary on the life and ideas of Arthur Zarek (played by the Maryland college's late philosopher-in-residence, Richard Kalter), a custodian at Pallo's art school and creator of music instruments designed to tap into spirituality. Zarek, who is clearly modeled on such unclassifiable American masters as John Cage, Partch and Morton Subotnick, makes an offer that can't be refused upon his death: His will states his multi-million dollar estate will be inherited by all the students who attend his memorial service --but only if they stay in the property as a group for a month.

Putting aside the unlikelihood that a custodian could own such a valuable piece of real estate, or that the studio seen on screen (decked out with acoustic, string and electronic devices of every shape and size) hardly looks like such a pricey property, premise carries all the earmarks of the kind of psycho-horror fodder that's the specialty of Bob Weinstein's Dimension

label -- or of Roger Corman back in the day. "The Instrument," though, surprises most for eschewing any genre tack whatsoever.

It also disposes with most of the overused "Blair Witch" docu-within-fiction strategy, even though things do get a tad hysterical. The student group, most with music training, seem to take to the studio live-in happening although it is strictly private and even a little like prison.

Zarek's ideas about "consonance" and such things as "outflowing hunting rituals" are just too nutty to take seriously, but the students concoct a series of music-based rites that become increasingly compelling to watch, even when the group gets twitchy with cabin fever.

Nemett covers the action with trippy wide-angle lensing and with more cameras than Pallo could possibly have for his film-within-film. Additionally, pic never makes sense of the insertion of Pallo's personal memories and dramas. Cast, looking like it's having a load of collegiate fun, never breaks the illusion of a docu.

Behind the scenes, pic received advice and research from novelist Joyce Carol Oates and scholar Cornel West, who makes a half-cracked cameo that's slightly shorter than his turns in the last two "Matrix" entries.

Camera (color, Super 16mm/DV), Frankie Tze Wei Ng, Chris Freilich; editor, Macauley Peterson; music, David Hittson, Ajay Kapur; music supervisors, Hittson, Clemens Morgenroth; production designer, Barry Nemett; art director, James Gillespie; set decorator, Jennifer Brea; costume designers, Brea, Penelope Tang; sound, Evan Naides; sound designer, Bob Kirschner; supervising sound editors, Peterson, Dominic Bartolini; visual effects, Freilich, Peterson; animation, John McGill; choreographer, Taryn Wayne; line producers, Brittany Blockman, Hittson, Kadi Hughes; assistant directors, Dan Wachtell, Naides. Reviewed on videotape, Los Angeles, May 16, 2005. (In Dances With Films.) Running time: 101 MIN.

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