



MIFF 2012: “Modest Reception” may warrant little more than just that

PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 14, 2012 BY TOPE IN MIFF, REVIEWS
TAGGED: ABSURDIST, AUDIO REVIEWS (COMEDY), IRANIAN, MANI HAGHIGHI, MIFF, MIFF 2012, MODEST RECEPTION, MONEY

[Tweet](#) [Digg +](#)

Modest Reception (Paziraie sadeh)

Directed by Mani Haghighi

Written by Mani Haghighi and Amir Reza Koohestani

2012, Iran

After the end credits and their free-jazz accompaniment had come to a close and the curtains began rolling inwards, I and the pair seated beside me exchanged some quick thoughts about what we thought we had just seen: an oddball Iranian road-film in which Leyla and Kaveh, two variably eccentric and somewhat suspect Tehranis, drive through the dry, wintry countryside with a carload of rial (the chief unit of Iranian currency) stuffed into 260 or so numbered plastic bags, most of which have already been done away with by the time the movie begins. Over the course of the film they attempt to give these millions upon millions of rial away to the various individuals they meet, almost all of whom are lower to working class men. The pair, whose relationship remains unclear thanks to the elaborate lies they concoct to throw any suspicious recipients off their scent, consider themselves to be almsgivers, but have a set of rules by which they must abide: one bag per person, and video evidence of the donation. On a very brief tangent, it is interesting to realise how ubiquitous the iPhone has become such that the repeated presence of one in a film barely registers as product placement. Returning to the task at hand, the pair beside me expressed reserved positivity about the film. What it was exactly that they liked about the film is up for speculation. I suspect it was the semi-novelty of the film's premise combined with the surprise of seeing chicly-dressed Iranians flinging engagingly scripted profanities at one another and behaving with a recklessness and near nihilism seen more commonly in a certain breed of Western film and less commonly in the rather socially conscious work that epitomises the current Iranian cinema.

Modest Reception is also very episodic, so much so that there are rarely any scenes, sequences or inserts linking one money drop to the next. This was probably a good decision, not so much narratively but tonally and thematically. A desire to embroider the episodes together with an obvious plotline would have detracted from the absurdity of Leyla and Kaveh's actions, the very thing that drives the viewer to wonder about and theorise on the significance of their behaviour. Who are these people and what gives them the liberty and license to expend large sums of money to the point of literally burning them? Are they criminals on the lam seeking to atone for their sins by doing good? Or are they members of the wealthy upper middle class that have grown altogether sick of their privilege and their lives, or two people mourning some deep loss or in the midst of *his and hers* matching existential crises? These answers will never be explicitly answered. Maybe implicitly, if you look and listen hard enough. In one instance, Kaveh is one the phone to his (or their?) mother who is for some reason on morphine. Dying perhaps? Based on Kaveh's reaction moments before he answers, either she isn't at death's door, or she *is* and he could give a rat's ass, or he's pretending not to...until it becomes clear that he gives a whole nest's worth towards the film's conclusion. Leyla on the other hand seems the more volatile and hot-headed of the pair, at least initially. She is confrontational, contradictory and impulsive but ultimately the most “sympathetic” of the two, according to the pair beside me, as “sympathetic” as either of these two get, if putting a sick mule out of its misery with seven shots from a pistol counts for anything. Neither was *likeable* though, not in the least.



The term *unlikelyable* is banded about far too often when people talk about movie characters, in a way that heavily idealises human beings as a species. As a term, “likeable” is wildly imprecise. It is a blanket statement, an implication that an individual is incapable of being liked, by anyone, anywhere. This must surely be hyperbole, logically, even statistically. Even Hitler must have had a couple of fans. Regardless of this, if a character says mean things a little too often, they are unlikelyable. If a character speaks their mind at all they could very well be at risk of being termed unlikelyable. If a character lies, steals, cheats, betrays or acts with “undue” self-interest, they are unlikelyable. Characters that say too much or say too little, do too much or do too little, feel too much or feel too little – and even those that are just right – are too often deemed disagreeable by critics and general audiences alike. It seems the only characters anybody gives half a chance are the idealised; the unassuming saint or the holy fool. T.E. Lawrence or Chance from *Being There*.



Of greatest relevance to *Modest Reception* though, is the character whose “unlikelyability” stems from the fact that they are hard to read, their motivations oblique or seemingly non-existent, their behaviour illogical or irrational; a cypher. In this respect, *Modest Reception* has some slight hints of absurdist theatre in the obsessive circularity of events and arguments, and the fact that the protagonists come across as instruments of randomness. But Leyla and Kaveh may not be quite as impenetrable as they seem. It may be as simple as it looks, on the simplest of levels: two rich people trying to give their fortune to the less fortunate, repeatedly perplexed by the fact that their gifts are met with anything but unreserved platitudes and beatification. It is exactly as the title implies. From the old man living in the feeblest of shacks to the shop owner suspicious of their liberal, big city ways and their bags of cash, our road-tripping almsgivers are perhaps faced with the realisation that all they have may be worthless to those who ostensibly have nothing. So is this another film about the emptiness of being a have-all; Sophia Coppola via Iran, only a hell more talkative? There is more than one mention of losing children, so maybe what we're seeing is a grieving couple simply acting out, raging against the universe and the kind of pain that money could never ease. But how this translates to the task they have set for themselves is difficult to see. And the rules? Does the self-congratulatory act of filming a donation not detract from its actual value? Why must the recipients be limited to one bag? And most curiously, why the unwillingness to accept refusal of their offer, such that they have to stage elaborate ploys in order to ensure that the money is at least taken, converting would-be donations into strange transactions of sorts. Not to view this film through the lens of “Iranian Cinema”, but *Modest Reception* seems to be on a vaguely similar socio-political wavelength to something like Panahi's *Crimson Gold* in its depictions of encounters across the class divide, wonderfully brought to life in this film by Haghighi and his entire cast. Unless something is being lost in translation, Iranian actors – pro or not – seem to be consummate performers, born into the school of naturalism. None of the performances here are to be faulted, least of all the very compelling lead characters. Taraneh Alisdoosti as Leyla is perhaps more watchable, partly due to her manic-pixie prettiness and her unpredictability, but writer-director-actor Haghighi as Kaveh seems more schooled, more assured, like his character's persona. Esmael Khalaj is very memorable as the Old Man with the shack, whose sense of self-sufficiency and contentment is disarmingly sincere. All this is fascinating to watch and discuss, but if so, why should the film be satisfied with a modest reception?



Most comedians *want* to be funny and *want* to draw laughs from their audiences, one would assume. Successful stand-ups internalise this desire, they embody the effort and time they have invested in their art and their act. They and the act become inseparable, and even though we as audience members are aware that there is something at work beneath the comic brilliance – divinely inspired, calculated or both – we laugh and we say “this guy is hilarious.” *Modest Reception* is not that guy. As novel and intriguing as it is, it is clearly trying for something without ever *becoming* that something. Haghighi's screenplay is sometimes engaging, sometime tedious, but always smart, and his direction is quite frankly laudable. The unforgiving bareness of the terrain and the way Haghighi and DP Houman Behmanesh capture it plays strongly into the film's allusions to the psychological states of the characters. Unfortunately, there is a very muffled ring of inauthenticity to *Modest Reception*, and it is often these dull, subterranean ringings that raise the most suspicion.

Tope Ogundare

Visit the [official website](#) for the Melbourne International Film Festival



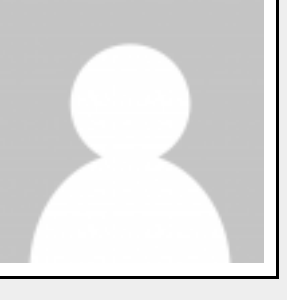
[Tweet](#) [Digg +](#)

Leave a Reply

[Submit Comment](#)

About Tope

WEBSITE | TWITTER | 23 POSTS



Nigerian-Australian Sydney-based med student, film enthusiast and fledgling writer. Also a soccer fan and filmmaker in-utero.

Other Posts by Tope

- 'Wasted on the Young' might be an understatement
- Sydney Film Festival 2012: 'Holly Motors' defies traditional logic and expectation, offering strange delights instead

Search Sound On Sight: [Search](#)

Recent Posts

‘The Last Stand’ trailer shows Schwarzenegger’s return to action lead
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 16, 2012 BY DEEPAYAN SENGUPTA

Arnold Schwarzenegger made a successful career for himself in Hollywood headlining action films throughout the 80s and 90s, and gained enough popularity to subsequently win two terms as the Governor of California. His movie career never really died, however, and ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

MIFF 2012: “Shadow Dancer” moves beautifully to an all too familiar tune
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 16, 2012 BY TOPE

Shadow Dancer Directed by James Marsh Written by Tom Brabby 2012, UK, Ireland There's no real reason to believe that the artistry required in the making of a documentary is vastly different to that required in the making of a ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

MIFF 2012: “NO” might be a hard sell, but is definite YES material
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 16, 2012 BY TOPE

NO Directed by Pablo Larraín Written by Pedro Peirano 2012, Chile Earlier this year, a pro-Pinochet documentary triggered off clashes at a screening in Santiago, Chile, and prompted calls for the film to be banned. But the Piñera administration declared ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

‘The Expendables 2’ is, at the very least, better than its disastrous predecessor
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 16, 2012 BY JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

The Expendables 2 Written by Richard Wenk and Sylvester Stallone Directed by Simon West USA, 2012 Of the myriad of problems with the horribly tedious first instalment of The Expendables, one of the most prominent was the incompetent execution of ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

‘360’ is an overload of flatness from Meirelles and Morgan
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 16, 2012 BY JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

360 Written by Peter Morgan Directed by Fernando Meirelles UK/Austria/France/Brazil, 2011 360's writer Peter Morgan has declared that the film is directly inspired by Reigen, an 1897 play notably adapted to film by Max Ophüls as La ronde in 1950. ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Sketchy Podcast, Episode 28 – Pokémon (ポケモン) [w/ Christopher Coleman]
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 15, 2012 BY RYAN CLAGG

Richard and Ryan welcome special guest Christopher Coleman (from A Pointless Endeavor podcast) to get more serious than they should about Pokémon. We're talkin' cartoons, video games, trading cards and of course, a Pokémon Name Game. Enjoy! Listen on ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Help Sound on Sight Get To TIFF
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 15, 2012 BY SIMON HOWELL

Give us money or we shoot the puppy. OK, not really. Here's what's up: the site is facing a couple of imminent financial issues of varying seriousness. The first is that at some point in the near future, we will ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

Jo Nesbo's 'Jackpot' has macabre comedic thrills, though founders a bit in its finale
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 15, 2012 BY JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

Jackpot Written for the screen and directed by Magnus Martens Norway, 2011 Following Headhunters, Jackpot is the second of an increasing list of Jo Nesbo adaptations for the big screen, and is similarly concerned with a hapless individual thrown into ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

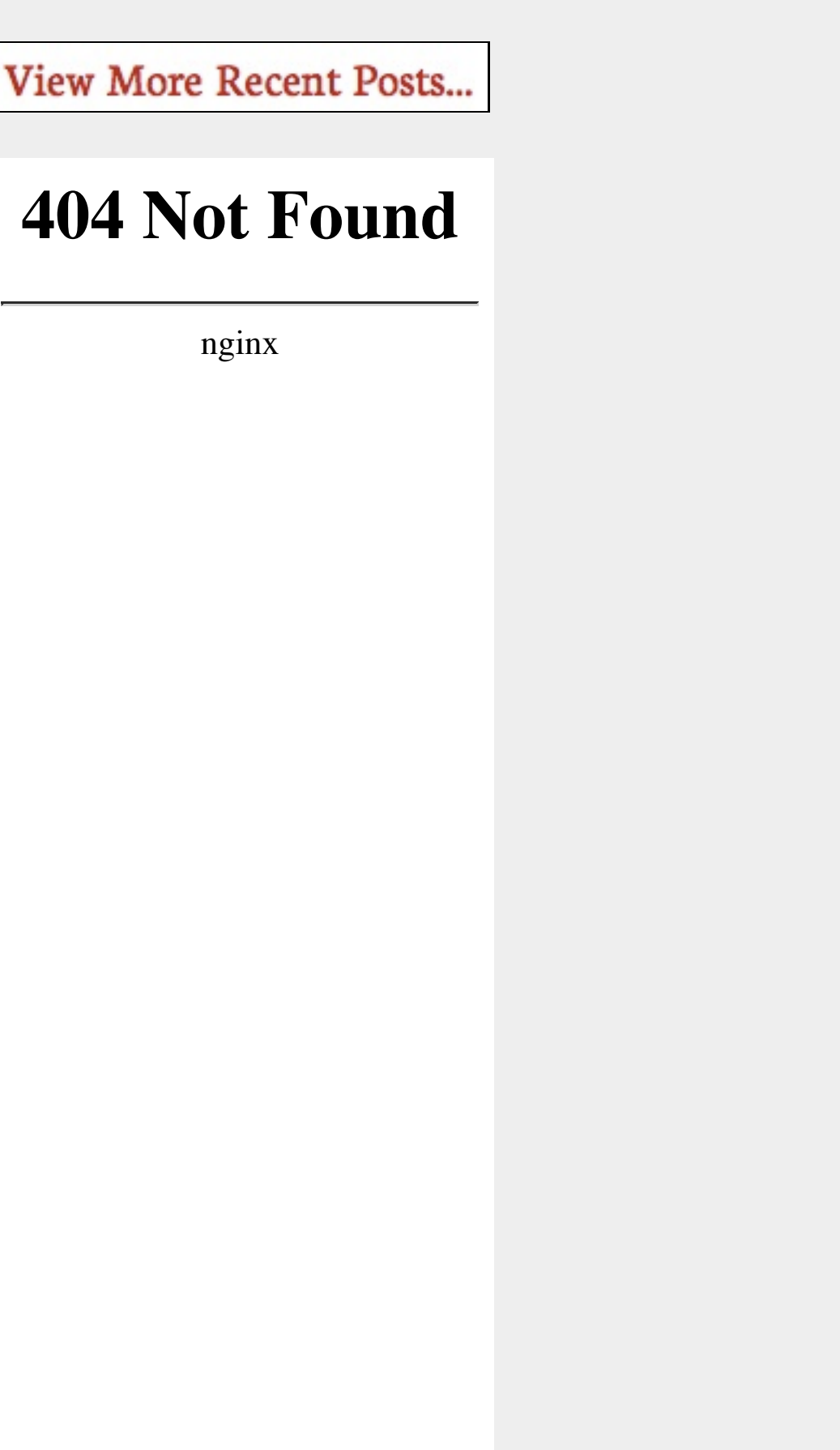
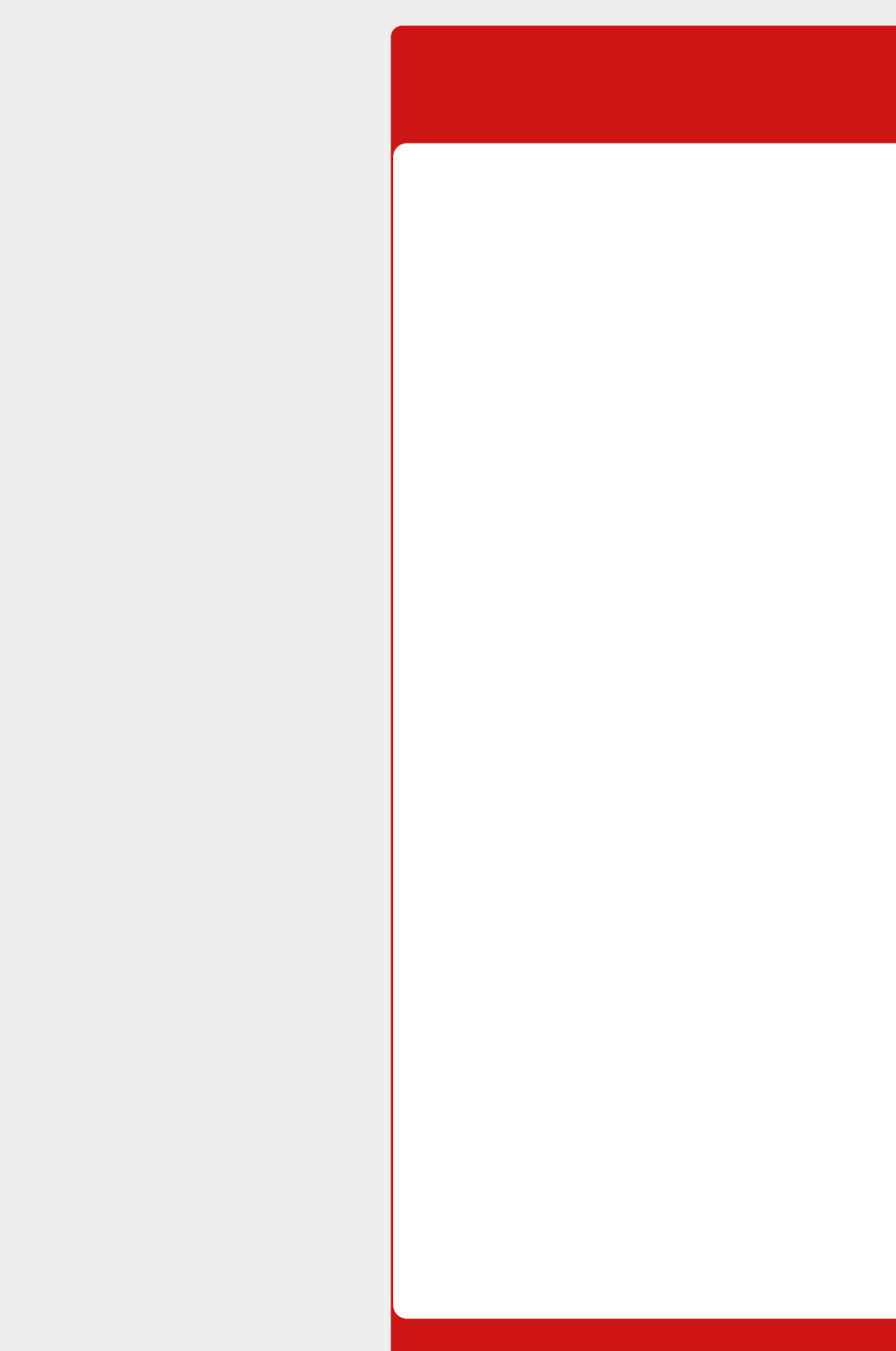
Move over, ‘Total Recall’: 10 more remakes you’ll want to avoid
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 15, 2012 BY BILL MESCE

Whether you measure your movies by box office, reviews, or popular appeal, Sony's \$125 million remake of the 1990 Action-fest Schwarzenegger interplanetary action fest Total Recall looks like a strike-out. The movie opened with a lethal softness; a \$25.7 million ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

‘The Odd Life of Timothy Green’ feels like it’s still at the drawing board
PUBLISHED ON AUGUST 15, 2012 BY EDGAR CHAPUT

The Odd Life of Timothy Green Directed by Peter Hedges Written by Peter Hedges and Hamet Zappa U.S.A., 2012 Everyone has their favorite Disney film. Actually, honesty is always the best policy, and pegging little deeper into the opinions of ... [\[Read the Rest\]](#)

[View More Recent Posts...](#)



Recent Comments

- “The script takes a nifty twist on the old story wi...” by **PB210** on Move over, ‘Total Recall’: 10 more remakes you’ll want to avoid
- “You are correct. Edited now...” by **Josh Slater-Williams** on ‘The Expendables 2’ is, at the very least, better than its disastrous predecessor
- “Great review as always Josh, but I think you may ha...” by **Smalley** on ‘The Expendables 2’ is, at the very least, better than its disastrous predecessor
- “Red Dawn was released in 1984, not 1975...” by **Jesus** on Move over, ‘Total Recall’: 10 more remakes you’ll want to avoid
- “[...] Full review at Sound on Sight Share this:Tw...” by **360 (Fernando Meirelles, 2011)** « Read Write Hand on ‘360’ is an overload of flatness from Meirelles and Morgan
- “[...] Full review at Sound on Sight Share this:Tw...” by **The Expendables 2 (Simon West, 2012)** « Read Write Hand on ‘The Expendables 2’ is, at the very least, better than its disastrous predecessor
- “[...] CLICK HERE TO LISTEN [...]...” by **Tyler on the Telescope** | More Than One Lesson on The Telescope #50- Spotlight on Breaking Bad/Nero Wolfe with Tyler Smith
- “Hmnm, I think your giving the Rise of the Planet of...” by **Edgar Chaput** on Move over, ‘Total Recall’: 10 more remakes you’ll want to avoid
- “[...] Full review at Sound on Sight Share this:Tw...” by **Jackpot (Magnus Martens, 2011)** « Read Write Hand on Jo Nesbo’s ‘Jackpot’ has macabre comedic thrills, though founders a bit in its finale
- ““The feasibility of Andrew not developing any carn...” by **Brian** on Inside Out 2012: ‘Cherry’ gratuitously indulges on the license of its premise