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Posted: Wed., Jun. 29, 2005, 4:17pm PT

Deepwater

A Halcyon Entertainment production. (International sales: Lightning Entertainment, Los Angeles.) Produced by Chris Coen. Executive producer, Peter Wetherell. Co-producer, Christopher Borrelli. Directed, written by David S. Marfield, based on the novel by Matthew F. Jones.

Nat Banyon - Lucas Black
Finch - Peter Coyote
Iris - Mia Maestro
Pam - Lesley Ann Warren

By **KEN EISNER**

Low-budget neo-noir looks like more than a million bucks, thanks to the vision of debut helmer David S. Marfield, who adapted story from a Southern Gothic novel by Matthew F. Jones. It also offers one of strongest, most unusual turns yet by Peter Coyote, as a rural tycoon who is either an evil manipulator or an oversized good ol' boy, depending on the interpretation -- with pic's main p.o.v. called into question as things get increasingly weird. Distribbs will need muscle to get "Deepwater" out of the shallow end of theatrical play, but cable and vid follow-ups should go swimmingly.

Noir format initially feels more than familiar, with damaged young drifter, Nat Banyon (compelling Lucas Black from "Friday Night Lights"), just out of rehab for an unexplained mishap and on his way to a new life in Wyoming (pic was shot in rural British Columbia). He rescues one-named Finch (Coyote) from a bad road accident and is rewarded with a job at the man's run-down resort motel.

The cigar-chomping, glad-handing Finch has his fingers in numerous local pies, such as car dealership (run by Michael Ironside, usually a bad omen) and a casino nominally headed by natives (including always-great Ben Cardinal).

Despite tough survival skills, Nat feels in over his head. What *really* does it is Finch's beautiful young wife, Iris (Argentine up-and-comer Mia Maestro of "The Motorcycle Diaries"). Her mysterious combination of come-hither hints and what-are-you-doing reactions baffle the blonde youngster, especially after they engage in several semi-nude gropes.

He's further confused by conflicting gossip from locals, including a lonely waitress played by fetching Lesley Ann Warren. But Nat's bewilderment also offers a suggestion not to trust his version of events, as people and pets -- like Finch's German shepherd -- go missing.

Helmer keeps heat on throughout, and viewers who don't cotton to the Chinese puzzle aspect of the tale will still respond to startling images from resourceful lenser Scott Kevan, who fashions iconic silhouettes and hallucinogenic, brightly colored dreamscapes out of what could have been bleak northern settings.

Charley Clouser's subtly burbling score is another unsettling plus. Critics could argue with Eric Strand's acid-dipped editing and pic's hyped-up sound, but Darren Aronofsky-stye disorientation ultimately pays off in a thriller twist that carves out unique territory -- even as it may freak out fans of genre convention.

With: Michael Ironside, Ben Cardinal, Kristen Bell, Xander Berkeley, Jason Cerbone, Dee Snider.

Camera (color), Scott Kevan; editors, Eric Strand, Zene Baker; music, Charlie Clouser; production designer, Jeremy Reed; art director, Shelley Bolton; set decorator, Stephanie Fielden-Justice; costume designer, Katia Stano; sound (Dolby), Tad Nazar; line producer, Dan Howard; assistant director, Matt Mellinghaus; casting, Carmen Cuba. Reviewed at Seattle Film Festival (New American Cinema), June 11, 2005. Running time: 93 MIN.

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