

Poster for killer Joe

[Killer Joe](killer-joe.html), [Cornerhouse](http://www.cornerhouse.org/)

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It is deeply enjoyable when typecast actors take on roles that corrupt their cliché screen personas. Robin Williams did it in 2002 for [One Hour Photo](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0265459/) by portraying an obsessive photo-lab technician who constructs a delusional reality for himself using other people's images. Having set himself up as a feel-good wizard of the sickening and schmaltzy after winning the Oscar for [Good Will Hunting](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6Egi5V_jNU), Williams moved on from emotive dross like Patch Adams and Bicentennial Man by refashioning himself as a disturbing, compulsive fanatic, combining his ability to evoke our yearning for kindness and compassion with darker, more sinister urges.

It is an unsettling and powerful performance, and you can see the beginnings of character Walter Finch, the scheming, self-conscious murderer from Christopher Nolan's [Insomnia](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0278504/) whom Williams played later that year in arguably the defining performance of his career.

In **Killer Joe**, Matthew McConaughey undergoes a similar metamorphosis. Following a slew of tedious romantic comedies that we need not name on these pages, he revels in his portrayal of Detective Joe Cooper, the eponymous hitman of the title. Contracted by Chris, a drug-peddling trailer-park dropout (Emile Hirsch) who wants to kill his mother for her life insurance money, Joe lopes onto the scene, a giant, bleary-eyed presence who is more outlaw than lawman. There is a sallow, drawn look to him that belies the cheap-grinned charmer of previous movies, and we soon see the terrible depths of Joe's badge-wielding depravity.

When Chris and father Ansel (Thomas Haden Church) realise they are unable to pay without the insurance money, Joe calls off the hit until he sees sister Dottie (Juno Temple) in the street and opts to take her virginity as a retainer for his services instead. The resulting date is fixed by the parents, and the detective drops by for tuna casserole before deflowering the vulnerable young woman with his hands gripped around her throat. For all his politeness, Joe seems a malevolent, nose-breaking sociopath who manipulates the entire squalid situation for his own pleasure.

Indeed, **Killer Joe** is a film that will offend many; it may tread on familiar crime-drama territory but explores much sicker recesses of the human psyche with a type of gallows humour that belongs to [Grand Guigno](http://www.grandguignol.com/) Grand Guignol theatre. Watch out for a particularly perverted moment involving a piece of fried chicken too; I won't say what it is here and to be honest, many of you won't want to know.

Matthew McConaughey in Killer Joe

Though McConaughey is captivating while pursuing such vile desires, in fact the real entertainment comes from the family themselves and the absurd comedy of their lives. Haden Church provides a masterful dumbshow as the plodding, tag-along father who assents to Chris's ridiculous schemes; We gotta get your

momma in the ground he says, without even considering that the scheme might not pay off. Naturally, things don't go according to plan, but then that is to be expected of a man who drinks beer in the morning and whose second wife - the pouting, clamorous Sharla (Gina Gershon) - exposes her pubic hair to her stepson in the opening scene.

As such, **Killer Joe** works as a comedy of idiots. Ansel tries to justify their actions with a fool's wisdom; 'Nothing's worse than regrets' he warns, 'not cancer, not sharks, not nothing!' With similar ignorance of the real world, his daughter Dottie displays an infantile curiosity and preoccupation with the stories of her life: 'what's the most exciting thing that's ever happened?' she asks Joe when they first meet. These early events mock the ignorance and inability of the characters to deal with the squalor and disappointment of their lives in Texas, which Ansel proclaims as 'really just a goddamn bunch of hicks and rednecks and too much space to walk around in.' It's the closest he gets to demonstrating the self-awareness needed to reflect on their predicament, as none of his family have any real solutions for their problems beyond ill-conceived criminal schemes and long-shot horse bets.

Even language fails them. Local drugs boss Digger exchanges pleasantries before threatening to bury Chris 'in a coffin about ten feet deep' then has him beaten up to hammer the message home. Manners play an ironic role here, with Joe demanding a decorous family dinner having just beaten a confession out of Sharla: 'Shall we dine?' he croons, before the violent climax of their proceedings.

It goes without saying that **Killer Joe** is the blackest of comedies, as it invites us to laugh not only at the failings and proclivities of its characters, but even more at their inability to deal with the situations they create. 'Just how stupid are you?' wails Ansel at Chris when the life insurance scam goes awry, 'Are you really that stupid?!' Riven with [Chekhovian absurdity](http://www.my-chekhov.com/biografiya.shtml "Chekhovian absurdity"), these scenes drew riotous laughter from the audience, though I also heard the remark, 'that wasn't what I expected,' as we were leaving too.

So director William Friedkin's reputation for bringing contentious, challenging material to the screen continues with **Killer Joe, and indeed the film illuminates his fascination for how people attempt to deal with forces beyond their control. Instead of [exorcising demonic forces](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070047/ "exorcising demonic forces") or [busting dope smugglers](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067116/ "busting dope smugglers"), this narrative depicts the overwhelming ignorance and perversion at the heart of most crimes. Like Chekhov, you wonder if Friedkin's aim is to draw attention to [morbid times](http://epress.anu.edu.au/chekhov/mobile_devices/ch01.html "morbid times") where society is overcome by idleness, boredom with life and lack of faith.**

Unfortunately, you can't help but think such graphic violence and savage laughter in the face of these social ills will more likely sicken viewers than urge them to create a solution. Despite eliciting incredible performances from an unlikely cast of actors, including a rather fortuitous shift in McConaughey's career prospects, Friedkin has created the ultimate video nasty: a crude, intelligent and brutal absurdity.

Is it worth watching? I'm not so sure. As Joe says: 'The less you know, the better for everyone involved.'