



[Killer Joe](#) , [Cornerhouse](#)

Reviewed by [Ian Betts](#) July 2012

It is deeply enjoyable when typecast actors take on roles that corrupt their clichéd screen personas. Robin Williams did it in 2002 for [One Hour Photo](#) 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](#) , 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](#) 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 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.

