

Upper-crust schoolgirl Lily (Anya Taylor-Joy) is hired to tutor her friend Amanda (Olivia Cooke) some years after a traumatic event. As their bond grows and anger deepens, they enlist a small-time drug dealer (Anton Yelchin) to take care of a family problem.

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Control is everything in this debut feature from playwright Cory Finley. From the precise editing to the not-a-word-out-of-place dialogue, or from the intricately tailored costumes to the alternately clattering and eerie score, this is one of the most carefully marshalled first films in donkey's years.



Control's also everything for the characters, be it restraining your emotions, pretending to be a normal human being existing in the world, or — yes — getting someone to murder for you. Coming on like Harold Pinter remaking *Heavenly Creatures* after mainlining *Les Diaboliques*, but with a devilish delight in the perverse that's all its own, *Thoroughbreds* is destined to be a word-of-mouth hit among teenage audiences: “You know — the one about the fucked-up girls.”

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Ah, and what fucked-up girls. Cooke and Taylor-Joy are perfect casting, their parallel careers real-life's healthier correlative to their

queasy chemistry on screen. They're both rising stars prominent in two huge upcoming films (*Ready Player One* and *The New Mutants* respectively), they both first made their mark carrying horror indies (*Ouija*, *The Witch*), and they're unusually self-possessed for actors born after *Jurassic Park* came out.

Director Finley must be thanking his lucky stars they are, as his dialogue,

both riddled with things unsaid and spat with venomous frankness, is batted between Cooke and Taylor-Joy with relish as they vie for who can manifest the darkest psychology. One is a psychopath who's disarmingly frank about her condition, the other the *ne plus ultra* of overachievers obsessed with — that word again — control.

Poor Anton Yelchin, here giving his final performance, would evince sympathetic feelings here even if he were still with us. Schwarzenegger himself would struggle if caught between the main twosome, so Yelchin's hapless loser, Tim, who the pair set about manipulating, hasn't got a chance. He's devoid of hope and smart enough to know it's his own fault — although he's not quite the helpless patsy the girls have him down for.

This may sound like the set-up for a twisty thriller, and this is where Finley's theatre roots either boost him or let him down, depending on your taste. Tension and twists aren't really the point: the girls using language to eke the

darkness out of one another is, which leads to a closing movement that, in its theatricality (exit stage left, muffled sound effect, enter stage right), may feel anticlimactic to some. Or, in its assured control over the audience, you may find it of a macabre piece with what's come before.

Dark fun, with performances to savour and a set of references too seldom made in today's pictures, this is a treat. It may peter out at the end, but what a calling card for Cory Finley, and this could be the last outing for its leads before superstardom beckons.