

# Olivia Cooke & Anya Taylor-Joy Plan A Murder In Excellent ‘Thoroughbreds’ [BFI London Film Fest Review]

[Oliver Lyttelton](#) October 10, 2017 4:59 pm

Money, goes the saying, can't buy you happiness, but it can buy you pretty much everything else, including an infinite sense of privilege, and an evasion of the justice system. A billionaire can hoodwink millions of people into thinking he's out to serve them despite living in a golden tower. The swamp can remain resolutely undrained as millionaire cabinet members can spend hundreds of thousands of taxpayer money on private jets. A movie executive can sexually harass and assault for at least two decades before facing anything vaguely resembling consequences.

On the surface, **Cory Finley's "Thoroughbreds"** is set in a very different world from this, focusing as it does on two teen girls in the Connecticut suburbs. But at its heart, it's about the same thing: the way that the wealthy think that different rules and morality apply to them. But it's about much more besides, and it results in one of the most assured and impressive American debut movies of the year.

In those aforementioned Connecticut suburbs, Amanda (**Olivia Cooke**) has gone round to the mansion of Lily (**Anya Taylor-Joy**). They were friends growing up, but seem to have lost touch more recently, but they've now been brought back together by Amanda's mom, who's paying Lily to tutor her daughter for the SATs. Amanda's a difficult girl. If she's not quite a psychopath, she's certainly psychopath adjacent, having recently gained notoriety for bloodily euthanizing her beloved pet horse (she's facing charges for animal cruelty), and she claims to feel no emotions about anything, ever.

Lily seems on the surface to be more put together and on the way to success. But as she uneasily reconnects with Amanda, that proves not to be the case. She was expelled from school and has been lying about an internship, and her home life is difficult thanks to her detested fitness-nut step-father Mark (peak TV staple **Paul Sparks** of “**Boardwalk Empire**,” “**House Of Cards**,” “**The Girlfriend Experience**” and “**The Night Of**”). Amanda has a simple solution: they should kill him. Or get someone else to kill him, at least, ensuring that they’re not found culpable. After initially rejecting the idea, Lily comes to consider it more seriously, and so they approach Tim (**Anton Yelchin**), an older boy vaguely connected with their social circle, and an aspiring drug dealer who did time for a statutory rape.

Like a lot of movies by first-time directors, “Thoroughbreds” wears its influences on its sleeve: a little “**Heavenly Creatures**,” some “**Strangers On A Train**,” a bit of “**Foxcatcher**,” a pinch of “**Gossip Girl**,” an echo of **Kenneth Lonergan’s “This Is Our Youth**” in the witty writing. But like the best movies by first-time directors, it repackages those influences into something that feels fresh. There’s a real confidence to the story that Finley’s telling here, and the way he does it.

Like Lonergan, Finley started off as a playwright, and it shows to some extent. Most of the movie is set in Lily’s family home, with long dialogue scenes (almost exclusively two or three-handers) and a four-act (or ‘Chapters,’ as the title cards name them) structure. But it feels claustrophobic only in the right way. Finley smartly blocks the action, and DP **Lyle Vincent** (“**The Bad Batch**”) shoots it with wandering steadicam, in a way that never makes it feel theatrical. The sense of unease is further driven by knife-edge editing by **Louise Ford** (“**The Witch**”), and terrific sound design that bleeds into the disruptive, percussive score by **Erik Friedlander**. If directing is in large part about picking the right collaborators, Finley’s off to a great start here.

That extends to the casting, too. In the last of his posthumous roles to reach the screen (the movie is dedicated to him), Yelchin gives another twitchy,

compelling turn that reminds us why he'll be missed so much. And Sparks, as the potential victim, plays both unlikeably into his persona (he played another creepy stepdad in "The Night Of"), while finding shading that suggests smartly that he might not actually be the bad guy here.

But the film's really dominated by its two female leads, and they're both pretty remarkable. Both have shown promise before — Cooke on "**Bates Motel**" and in "**Me, Earl & The Dying Girl**," Taylor-Joy in "**Split**" and "**The Witch**" — but they're on a different level here. Cooke's performance could be flat and monotone as written, but she makes Amanda a far more tragic character than she could have been. Taylor-Joy goes the other way. Lily is initially the more well-adjusted one, but the actress quickly shows a sociopathy of a sort underneath without ever making her a monster.

And it's the pair's bond that helps to make the film more interesting than just a study of wealthy murderousness (though it's great at that too). It's also a portrait of female friendship that, despite the dark places it goes to, proves to be oddly touching. It marks Finley as a really exciting talent going forward, and the film deserves to find an audience when it opens next March. [A-]

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