

## Future Film Festival preview: *Whiplash* review

### Maisie Bruno admires a ferocious battle of wills between student and teacher

by Maisie Bruno

*Whiplash* is unlike a typical success story, where the protagonist experiences a series of adrenaline pumping highs and tear-jerking lows to finally emerge a better person in the film's climax. Instead, *Whiplash* is a complex exploration into the student/mentor relationship, and demonstrates how influence and control can affect and inhibit someone. Masterfully directed by Damien Chazelle, *Whiplash* is intense, cruel and devastating, never ceasing to relieve any of the tension it builds within the walls of its key setting: New York's prestigious Shaffer music conservatory.

We watch Andrew (Miles Teller), a nineteen year-old jazz drummer, as his passion for playing decays into an obsessive desperation for conductor Terrence Fletcher's (J.K. Simmons) approval. Fletcher continually pushes Andrew, who is in his first year at Shaffer, beyond breaking point. Each scene feels like a guitar string slowly being wound tighter and tighter, straining and stretching, as we anxiously await the snapping point. Yet when you think the snapping point will arrive, the double waltz gets faster and Fletcher becomes even more enraged. Chazelle creates an atmosphere where every bead of sweat and pool of blood feels like your own.

The drumming does subside for a love story to emerge yet this only accentuates the destruction Fletcher causes in Andrew's life. Fletcher repeatedly insults and degrades Andrew in front of his class, however this only drives him to gain his respect, creating both romantic and familial tensions for Andrew. Many films about musicians are inspirational tales of dedication and commitment, yet while Andrew certainly possesses these qualities, the strenuous physicality of drumming takes its toll on him. Shots of Andrew's bleeding fingers and exhausted, sweat-dripping body remind us that the path to success is often burdened with pressure and pain. These scenes are agonisingly uncomfortable to watch, but I found myself unable to look away from the hypnotic battering of the drums, submerged in the same trance like state as Andrew.

Chazelle based *Whiplash* on his own past as a drummer in a jazz band, with Terrence Fletcher being a more extreme version of his high school music teacher. Simmons ripples with anger as the infamous conductor whose metronomic footsteps prowl the halls of Shaffer searching for the next Charlie Parker, the legendary jazz saxophonist. Fletcher feeds on the failures of his musical prey, humiliating them one by one. In his presence students fearfully look down, unable to make eye contact; you can almost sense their adrenaline rising as he makes his meticulous arrival to class, not a second early and not a second late. I left *Whiplash* feeling verbally abused and terrorised by Terrence Fletcher myself.

In Fletcher's eyes, if you are going to play an instrument it's not worth it unless you aim to reach perfection and brilliance, and overcoming humiliation is necessary in achieving that. How much abuse are you willing to ignore to be a jazz legend? He repeatedly tells the inspirational story that supposedly happened to Parker who, when onstage as a young musician, messed up his improvisation; this led drummer Jo Jones to throw a cymbal at his head. Humiliated, Parker returned home and practiced religiously, turning his failure into virtuoso playing. This apocrypha seems to drive Fletcher to an almost sadomasochistic level of bullying, yet you cannot help but wonder where his own Charlie Parker level career is. His bullying is perhaps born out of jealousy and resentment for those who have the chance to accomplish what he never could.

Unfortunately, *Whiplash* could be viewed as an endorsement to this kind of cruelty, because although Andrew has highs and lows in the film, Fletcher's aggression and malice ultimately makes the young man a better drummer. Simmons's character is a thought provoking one who expresses many ideas on success, one being that "there are no two words in the English language more harmful than good job". Thankfully Chazelle delivers more than just a 'good job' with *Whiplash*, as you remain locked in its perpetual rhythm long after you leave the cinema.

**Whiplash screens at 3pm in NFT1 on Sat 21 Feb**

**Maisie Bruno was a successful applicant for the IdeasTap and BFI Film Journalism Workshop and Mentoring brief.**