

Ross: Fielder, Stone mesmerize in uncomfortable satire 'The Curse'

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Comedian Nathan Fielder, known for his awkward deadpan style and outlandish comedy skits, teamed up with Academy Award-winning actress Emma Stone for his first fully dramatic role in his new show, "The Curse." The show follows a newlywed couple played by Fielder and Stone filming an up-and-coming HGTV home-renovation show in a small New Mexico town. Gradually, a little girl's curse disrupts their lives and reveals cracks in their relationship. While "The Curse" is fully scripted – unlike Fielder's previous reality shows – it still retains Fielder-like comedy that melds together dark, cringe-inducing moments, making the show unlike anything airing right now.

Fielder's goal in "The Curse" is to unsettle his audience, and part of his success in this regard comes from his creative partnership with Benny Safdie, one half of the writing/directing pair the Safdie brothers, who are behind notoriously tense films such as "Uncut Gems" and "Good Time." The duo already being fans of each other's work makes Fielder's surreal humor and Safdie's psychological atmosphere blend seamlessly into the script.

Most of "The Curse's" shots are stationary and capture the action from a distance, causing some discomfort, as if we, the viewer, are intruding on the intimacy of the characters' lives. This stylistic choice captures the irony behind the couple's performance. Their seemingly perfect lives when the cameras are rolling for their reality show contrasts with the couple's raw and more troubled personalities.

The show's tone is complimented by its two main performances. Fielder is still, unapologetically, himself, but in "The Curse," he's at the top of his game with his most demanding and dramatic role yet (and possibly his most cringe-inducing to date). Stone, who can already hold her own in the comedy field, brings her charm and continues to be a delight to watch, perfectly balancing the spotlight between her and Fielder. Stone's ability to capture the viewer's sympathy even when her character is an inherently bad person showcases her range, proving she is one of the best actors working in Hollywood today. Their line deliveries, mannerisms and offsetting dynamic carry much of the show's comedy.

The episodes' longer runtime allows for a slower pace than Fielder's previous works. This made my skin crawl, as if there was a lingering dread I couldn't escape, with every moment of the show building to an unforeseen climax. However, many who aren't fond of slow-burn shows should steer clear of "The Curse," as you might question if you should keep watching. Some reviews from audiences expected this to be another one of Fielder's snappy projects like "Nathan for You," when in reality "The Curse" is completely new. The show marinates and takes its time.



Showtime

Emma Stone and Nathan Fielder pose as Whitney and Asher Siegel in a promotional image for "The Curse." The A24-produced show is available to stream on Showtime.

In the same vein as HBO's recent "The White Lotus," "The Curse" explores the power of privilege through satire and dark comedy, showing how the main couple is plaguing the locals of Espanola. On the surface, characters show altruistic motivations to help the community around them through the use of their reality show to shine a light on the impoverished area and the sustainable homes they build. However, their naivety and hope for success highlight how tone-deaf they actually are and how their reality show "flipanthropy" subtly glorifies gentrification.

Whether the titular curse is real or not, the idea of it slowly consumes the characters, adding tension and leading to a truly unforgettable and unpredictable finale. Fielder has already shown his incomprehensible mind in past shows, and he somehow levels up again, with help from Safdie. "The Curse" is a show just shy of genius which viewers will either love or hate. It's a multilayered, complex commentary that mirrors the artificial progressiveness rampant in society today. With Fielder and Stone front and center, it's something absolutely horrifying to witness.