Written by Dave Canfield
Thursday, 01 April 2010 14:42

Bong Joon-ho’s last film, THE HOST, was about a family struggling to stay together as a monster ravaged the city around them, kidnapping loved ones and spreading plague. His new movie, MOTHER, is also about a family with monster problems—but this beast is more elusive, more sinister and, one can argue, harder to fight. If THE HOST turned standard monster-on-the-loose fare on its head by upping the ante on its simple genre demands, then MOTHER (currently playing in numerous cities from Magnolia Pictures, and opening in more this Friday and throughout the spring) continues in that vein to even greater effect by transcending whatever genre labels one tries to put on it.

An aging single mother (Kim Hye-ja) cares for Do-joon (Won Bin), her mentally disabled son, as well as she can. But although he’s 27 years old, his naivete and childish behavior constantly get him in trouble. Late one night, while walking alone, he comes upon a beautiful young girl and decides to follow her until she disappears down an alley. When the police find her dead the next morning, Do-joon is accused. Horrified, Mother sets about trying to prove her son innocent, only to be blocked by incompetent lawyers, lazy police and bureaucratic red tape. Undaunted, she embarks on a dangerous investigation to exonerate her son.

Along the way, Mother gets into all the scrapes that amateur detectives tend to encounter in movies—but luckily, her story is in the hands of a director who knows how to exploit the claustrophobia of a closet, the killing blow and the pain of guilt. Bong is just as much at home pulling off a suspenseful homage to Hitchcock as he is during MOTHER’s quieter, almost cinema-vérité moments.

This could have been the stuff of mere melodrama—something Korean cinema often indulges in. But MOTHER eschews that in favor of quite effective moments of comedy, nail-biting suspense, harrowing violence and heartbreaking revelations. To call MOTHER a mystery-thriller

or suspense film is to risk doing it a disservice, or more accurately, doing a disservice to potential viewers who might then balk at the slow burn of the pacing. Bong and his cast tell a story that resonates with an emotional depth too seldom associated with genre storytelling. This is enigmatic stuff, and how you respond to it is likely to depend at least somewhat on your willingness to explore the deeper regions of the human heart, where guilt and innocence are far less easy to distinguish and judge than the law as put forth in courtrooms. Unlike a judge who can hide behind the law, Bong takes everything into account and creates a film where judgment must be cast, yet it must be guided by mercy. Punishment in this world is enough, the film seems to whisper, even if we don’t know that we should completely trust the voice.

I’m not familiar with Kim’s previous work, but this is an extraordinary performance and one that may have you seeking her other roles out. One minute we cheer for her, and at another we feel her crushing despair. But as the film edges into darker and darker territory, she meets it head-on. To say more about her character arc would risk spoilers, but like MOTHER itself, she is able to move from moments of sheer terror and panicked desperation to quiet contemplation in the wink of an eye. We sense there is nothing she wouldn’t do for her son, even as we question her modus operandi and finally her motives.

South Korea’s official entry into the 2010 Academy Awards, MOTHER is the kind of film that horror fans would do themselves a favor to see. Full of dread, guilt, terror and all modern Gothic atmosphere, it exploits these for all the right reasons and ends up in a sublime landscape that may be delusionally damnatory or childlike in its vision of redemption. I take the darker view.

***1/2

{jcomments on}