

“MAMA” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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There’s a marvelous scene about a half-hour into MAMA, which exemplifies what’s best about the film and also points up what it could use more of.

Like all the works of Guillermo del Toro, executive producer and godfather of this one, MAMA functions as a dark fairy tale (even opening with an onscreen “Once upon a time...”), albeit here with the very modern inciting circumstance of the financial crisis. Panicked executive Jeffrey (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) has shot a couple of co-workers and his wife and whisks his tiny daughters out of their home, driving off into the snowy countryside to a likely unpleasant destination. Fate intervenes in the form of the titular specter, and the story jumps ahead five years to find Jeffrey’s brother Lucas (also Coster-Waldau) continuing to back a search for his nieces, though his means of financing it have run out. The girls, now-8-year-old Victoria (Megan Charpentier) and 6-year-old Lilly (Isabelle Nelisse), are discovered in a rundown cabin in the middle of the woods, scampering about like animals and barely able to speak—their survival inexplicable, but a miracle for Lucas.



Not quite so enthusiastic is his live-in girlfriend Annabel, played by Jessica Chastain in a decided change of pace. Her flame-red hair dyed black and cropped short, her arms festooned with tattoos, she is here cast as punk-band drummer with no particular motherly tendencies, and does a persuasive job of submerging her natural warmth beneath Annabel’s

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live-for-the-moment attitude. She’s not the only one who would rather see Victoria and Lilly live elsewhere—the girls’ aunt Jean (Jane Moffat) makes a full-court press for custody—but psychiatrist Dr. Dreyfuss (Daniel Kash) believes it’s best for them to stay where he can continue to oversee and evaluate their progress, and arranges for Lucas, Annabel and the children to move into a large and cozy house in the suburbs.

The first act of MAMA, directed by Andy Muschietti and scripted by him, his sister Barbara and Neil Cross, based on the Muschiettis’ much-admired short film, does a nice, teasing job of establishing both the touchy domestic situation and the supernatural mystery of the girls’ caregiver. Victoria and Lilly were apparently looked after by a presence they call “Mama,” whom Dr. Dreyfuss believes—on the surface, anyway—was conjured up in their minds as a defense mechanism. But Mama is soon manifesting in the new family’s home, most notably in the terrific aforementioned scene: a long, static take in which Annabel stands obliviously in a hallway while evidence of Mama’s presence plays out beyond a half-open door. With no music and little dialogue, it’s a great creepy/suggestive bit in the classic ghost-story tradition.

After not very long, MAMA begins hewing to the more recent supernatural screen fashion, offering lengthier looks at Mama, who is not pleased about having her “children” taken away from her. Mama is played by Javier Botet, the tall, gangly Spanish actor who launched a thousand nightmares as “the Medeiros girl” in the [REC] films and is certainly well-cast here, though the compositing FX work used to insert him as Mama (with an unhealthy blue pallor and digitally distorted face and flowing hair) into many scenes tends to make him look more like a special effect than he actually is. He/she also didn’t really need the loud blasts of music that accompany his/her subsequent screen appearances, and are part of a generally unsubtle score by Fernando Velázquez.

More compelling than this bombast are the remarkable performances of young Charpentier and Nelisse, both wrenchingly believable as children who have reverted to feral behavior that Victoria is somewhat more easily coaxed out of. She and Annabel slowly begin to forge a bond as Mama becomes more actively malevolent, while Lilly remains reluctant to emotionally let Mama go, and therein lies MAMA’s most effective tension. The adult interaction with the spirit is more conventional and thus less effective; it’s abundantly clear where Jean’s story arc is going from the moment she appears on screen, and the film’s plotting becomes awkward in the second half as it strains to maneuver the characters onto Mama’s home turf.

If the script proves a letdown, Muschietti’s direction is more confident, especially for a feature first-timer, evidencing a fine visual sense and eye for detail and motifs (like Victoria’s glasses in the early scenes). He works well with actors, too; there are no weak links in the cast, even if

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one can occasionally become frustrated with the characters. MAMA is good enough that you'll want to see what Muschietti does next, and its good parts are good enough to leave you wishing the whole movie was up to their level.

