

Fango Flashback: “BLACK CHRISTMAS” (1974)

Written by Jorge Solis

Saturday, 18 December 2010 10:01



With the holiday season upon us, the time is right to take a look back at Bob Clark’s groundbreaking chiller BLACK CHRISTMAS. In a scenario that became a popular convention of the horror genre, a deranged killer calls from inside a house, threatening to murder its inhabitants; to this day, fans passionately argue that this movie was the inventor of the slasher genre, a precursor to John Carpenter’s HALLOWEEN by four years.

The sorority house of Pi Kappa Sigma is mostly vacant because of the holiday break. Jesse (Olivia Hussey) is worried about how her boyfriend Peter will react to the news she is pregnant. Clare (Lynne Griffin) feels like an outsider among the group, anxiously waiting for her father to pick her up. Phyl (Andrea Martin) has made other plans for her vacation, which upsets her boyfriend. Barb (Margot Kidder) is distant from the others and drinks too much because of troubles at home. Somehow, all their problems seem to fade away once they receive another phone call from someone they refer to as “The Moaner.”



The obscene shrieks rattle everyone in the room, and when Barb angrily grabs the phone and insults him, the voice instantly calms down and plainly promises to kill her, abruptly ending the call. The voice on the phone names himself Billy, and he has just broken into the sorority house, living in the attic. The first shot of the movie is seen from Billy’s point of view, and the prowler has been watching these girls from the start, studying the layout of the house.

None of the sorority sisters realize anything’s wrong when Clare suddenly disappears, believing her dad has collected her—but he winds up searching for her on the snow-covered campus. The Bedford police force have their hands full dealing with a missing high-school girl, and Sergeant Nash could care less about an obscene phone call, especially when that girl is found murdered. Lt. Fuller (John Saxon) jumps in when he realizes the caller and this killing in the park might be connected.

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Meanwhile, Jesse and Peter have a frank discussion about whether they should keep the baby. This subplot involving abortion is quite unexpected for a film made and set in the early '70s. Jesse doesn't want to have the baby because she's clearly not ready to be a mother, and Peter reacts by proposing to her, thinking marriage will solve everything. Their reactions to the situation are relatable and realistic. Billy is always close as he listens in on the conversations between Peter and Jesse. Clearly unhappy with Jesse and fraught with emotion, Peter wanders around the sorority house, as if stalking the place—and from the evidence available, Lt. Fuller deduces that Peter might be the caller.

Though the kill scenes are never graphic, they are unsettling to watch. The audience is given just a flash when Billy covers Clare's face with a plastic bag. Viewers never see the dead body of the high-school girl; they only witness the facial expressions of the bystanders. Just a glimpse of blood is seen when Billy stabs Barb with a crystal unicorn. While Barb is being killed in her bedroom, we watch Christmas carolers singing outside the sorority house. The ending is quite disturbing—but also contains a major plot hole in which Lt. Fuller acts out of character, contradicting his previous behavior as a good detective throughout the rest of the film.



Whether or not you liked the 2006 remake (see our review [here](#)), an undeniable and major difference between the two films is Billy's characterization. In the update, the unseen killer is given a face and is provided with a detailed backstory—yet Billy seems to lose his edge the more you know about him. His motives are never fully explained in Clark's version, and he even seems to have multiple personalities as he easily changes his voice during his calls.

Clark's BLACK CHRISTMAS is a solidly effective slasher movie, with excellent acting from the ensemble cast. The words “Agnes, it's me, Billy” have become immortalized in the minds of fright fans since the '70s thanks to this enduring cult classic.

{comments on}

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