

“THE LAST EXORCISM” (Fantasia Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Tuesday, 03 August 2010 15:55



It might seem that there's little left to be done with the devil-possession subgenre or pseudodocumentary horror, but in combining the two, *THE LAST EXORCISM* comes up with something fresh. The movie, which had its international premiere at the recent [Fantasia film festival](#) in Montreal and opens theatrically August 27 from Lionsgate, delivers thrills that have nothing to do with spewed pea soup or shaky runs through dark woods.

Director Daniel Stamm, working from a script by Huck Botko and Andrew Gurland, sets up and develops *THE LAST EXORCISM* as a more formal nonfiction feature than the likes of *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT* or *CLOVERFIELD*. Footage is chronologically re-edited for dramatic (or comedic) effect, and it's occasionally scored (fine, edgy music by Nathan Barr). The subject being filmed by the two-person crew-within-the-movie is Cotton Marcus (Patrick Fabian) a Southern preacher who's charismatic, funny and a hit with his congregation—but has experienced a crisis of conscience. He has long been performing *faux* exorcisms on people apparently afflicted by demons, knowing well that his staged rites merely serve as a placebo that can shock the subjects out of whatever psychological problems are truly ailing them. But a recent tragedy and his own family situation have led him to see the light, and now he has not only renounced the duplicitous practice, but aims to expose its tricks on camera so that others won't be fooled. To that end, he randomly picks a case from among the many pleas for help he has received, and he and the crew are off to a remote Louisiana farmhouse.



THE LAST EXORCISM wouldn't work as well as it does without the right actor in the lead role, and Fabian is perfect as Cotton. Charismatic enough to convince as a religious man of the

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people (there’s a very amusing moment in which he proves he can get his congregation to yell “Hallelujah!” to just about anything), he also imbues Cotton with a depth of feeling beneath his showmanship that convinces us of his potential concern for others. That side increasingly comes to the fore as he gets to know Nell Sweetzer (Ashley Bell), the 16-year-old alleged possessee whom he has been called to treat at that farmhouse. Her father Louis (Louis Herthum), a widower who has turned wholeheartedly to God since his wife’s death, believes that Nell’s bizarre behavior—drawing frightening pictures, killing animals—is Satan’s work, and Cotton obligingly goes through the motions he always has before. But as he puts on the usual masquerade, a couple of odd occurrences suggest that perhaps the occult is at play, even after Cotton and his group leave the Sweetzer house with Nell apparently cured.

We know she isn’t, of course—not this early in the movie—and there’s good tingly fun waiting to see how Cotton will learn that his theatrics didn’t solve matters, and how he’ll deal with that knowledge. What will he do when confronted with the possibility of an actual demonic, or Satanic, presence? At the same time, THE LAST EXORCISM raises the strong possibility that what’s plaguing Nell is not supernatural at all, as other locals shed light on the Sweetzers’ background and the documentary’s producer Iris (Iris Bahr, who was also in the still-unreleased vérité shocker THE POUGHKEEPSIE TAPES) uncovers unpleasant evidence of what’s really going on in the family’s home.

Botko and Gurland’s script does a neat balancing act, keeping the audience guessing about the true nature of Nell’s problems. Stamm, with strong assist from cinematographer Zoltan Honti, does well by the film’s horror elements, adroitly using the subjective point of view to build up the scares and generating true disturbing intensity in the second half. (How this emotionally grueling and sporadically brutal film landed a PG-13 is perhaps something that producer Eli Roth, who got away with an onscreen castration in the R-rated HOSTEL: PART II, could explain.) But the filmmakers are even more successful with the mock-documentary side: Eschewing queasy-making shaky-cam (we’re supposed to be watching the work of a professional cameraman, after all), they create an onscreen scenario as compelling as many a real nonfiction feature, with a number of effective character asides (the hostile first reaction of Louis’ son Caleb, played by Caleb Landry Jones, to the film crew’s presence; Iris compulsively giving Nell her fancy boots after the girl admires them) that ground the proceedings in the real world.

The only part of THE LAST EXORCISM that doesn’t quite work, unfortunately, is the ending. Without spoiling anything, let’s just say that what happens in the film’s final minutes undercuts the carefully established verisimilitude of what has come before, in more than one way. That the resolution is a disappointment, though, does serve to point up how potently plausible the rest of THE LAST EXORCISM is. The poster beseeches you to “Believe in Him,” and whether you believe in the devil or not, you’ll absolutely believe in Cotton before much of the running time has gone by.

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