

## “HATCHET II” (DVD/Blu-ray Review)

Written by Jack Bennett

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HATCHET II hits DVD and Blu-ray from Dark Sky Films today—with a little more significance than most theatrically released movies, since AMC killed that run in some theaters three days after it began. Whether you view AMC’s decision as the rational reaction to an underperforming film or decry the ratings standards that led to a limited theatrical break, the disc releases are more than likely your first chance to see HATCHET II.

A trip to the Redbox, however, will grant you the neutered R-rated cut created by Dark Sky. That version will remind fans of the R-edit of DEAD ALIVE, another movie defined by cartoonishly excessive gore gags. In that instance, the scaling back of blood was synonymous with scaling back the quality, and the difference between the unrated release and the R version was the difference between a modern classic and a goofy time-waster. HATCHET II is no classic, but similarly meaningless without its gleeful, inmates-taking-over-the-asylum approach to blood and guts, as evidenced by the Unrated Director’s Cut now available.



Following up his 2007 sleeper, writer/director Adam Green keeps HATCHET II consistent with the first film’s obnoxiously arch characters and hilariously extended murder scenes. While the original followed a group of dumb tourists as they’re picked off by disfigured hatchet-wielder Victor Crowley (Kane Hodder, as unrecognizable as he was under Jason’s hockey mask), the sequel serves up stereotypical but self-aware gun-toting hicks hunting Crowley in the swamps outside New Orleans. Like its predecessor, HATCHET II is a horror/comedy closer in tone to CABIN FEVER than the classics those films sought to emulate. Hardly the “Old School American Horror” it was marketed as, HATCHET was pretty stupid but charming in a CANNIBAL: THE MUSICAL kind of way, and whenever the lame banter threatened to become unbearable, the movie would whip out a horror beat so incredibly loud and protracted that you couldn’t help but giggle (again proving that these kinds of movies are funnier when straight-faced, e.g. SHAUN OF THE DEAD and EVIL DEAD II).

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The sequel would have benefitted from a tongue held more firmly in its cheek, but HATCHET II piles on the sophomoric humor and adds to it a dozen winking callbacks to the first film. Green clearly values his fans, but was HATCHET enough of a phenomenon that the sequel can afford to be so self-referential? There's also a quick reference to FROZEN and a sly nod to BEHIND THE MASK, as if Green aspires to be horror's answer to Kevin Smith.

HATCHET II picks up at the exact moment of HATCHET's anticlimactic final shot, except Joel David Moore is missing and Marybeth is now played by HALLOWEEN's Danielle Harris (taking over from Tamara Feldman). The recasting turns out to be an upgrade, as is the decision to expand Tony Todd's joke cameo as Reverend Zombie from the first film into this installment's second lead. Parry Shen, who gave a genuinely funny performance as Shawn in HATCHET, is brought back here via the oldest trick in the book for an unfortunately less humorous role. Also returning are most of the crew behind the camera, and HATCHET II is visibly better shot, better directed and generally better made than the original. Even the acting and humor are better, but the tone alternates rapidly between irreverent and reverential, asking us to be invested in earnest, emotional scenes directly following a dumb boob joke.

Between a misguided half-hour spent expanding the Victor Crowley/Marybeth mythos, the broken continuity mixed with reliance on familiarity with the first movie (Marybeth constantly reminds us that this sequel takes place the day after HATCHET) and the relentlessly glib dialogue, HATCHET II is tedious and lousy with self-love for most of its running time. All the entertainment value is in the kills, and Green and co. work hard to distinguish that aspect of HATCHET II. The first movie's death scenes were less inventive than they were bloody and bone-crunching (and surprisingly light on hatchet action), but the sequel gives us plenty of over-the-top killings: a man strangled with his own intestines, a cleaved face that takes a moment to slide off a skull and a beheading that doesn't quite interrupt some coitus. Even the overkill is occasionally overkill; at one point Crowley murders a man with the blunt part of his ax for no reason more apparent than trying something different.

The practical gore FX are a blast, but they add up to maybe a quarter of the movie. The saving grace of the non-violent scenes is Todd, who continues to be an elegant and charismatic presence in even the flimsiest roles. While his dialogue in HATCHET II is heavy on exposition, the mere sound of his voice is more engaging than all the labored mugging of the first film's cast.

That voice turns up on the discs' cast commentary, with Todd joined by Hodder and Green for a

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chummy track which pays much tribute to “the fans” between references to press, hype and “the HATCHET franchise,” as if it was far more than just a pair of independent horror movies. The crew commentary is actually more interesting, featuring a more relaxed Green with cinematographer Will Barratt and special makeup artist Robert Pendergraft revealing every scene’s shooting conditions and the secrets behind their FX shots. Green dominates both commentaries with his anecdotes and kvetching, and delivers a big self-pitying soapbox near the end of the cast track before closing with a lecture to anyone who downloads movies illegally. That’s not to be unkind to his ordeal in getting HATCHET II to theaters only to watch it disappear, but while Green’s enthusiasm and passion is undeniable, his intensity can be tiresome, especially in contrast to Hodder’s equally perceptive but far more gracious observations and Todd’s jovial chuckles and general optimism.

The affection between the three men is genuine, but Green’s preoccupation with the expectations and specific reactions to his movies might indicate why HATCHET II doesn’t really work. Green made HATCHET II exclusively for his devotees, and while in theory that means those who love all bloody, funny horror flicks, his aim is so narrowly pointed at rabid lovers of HATCHET that the sequel plays like home videos of a party you missed. Even the fun of recognizing Tom Holland and R.A. Mihailoff on screen doesn’t translate to a more enjoyable movie. The discs also contain a well-edited behind-the-scenes featurette, which compares storyboards to certain shots, drops in some b-roll and features a lot of Green overselling in a sometimes defensive, sometimes starry-eyed tone. Blu-ray buyers will also experience an EPK-style “First Look” at the movie and have another chance to “Meet the FX Team.”

HATCHET II does look like it was fun to make, and the enthusiastic cast and crew have nothing but good things to say, but it follows suit that all the content on the HATCHET II discs preaches to the converted and will be unedifying to anyone else. When Green mentions that his priority with HATCHET II was giving the fans what they want, you might wish he was talking about fans of horror, instead of just fans of HATCHET.

MOVIE: 

DISC PACKAGE: 

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