THE LAST EXORCISM is an exciting film. It's exciting to watch, be a part of and then eagerly discuss after. It has an incredible amount of merits and no matter what you think of the now much discussed last 10 minutes, you'll leave the theater with some sort of stimulation and lasting impression. A fresh story in an old subgenre; a new, talented director; excellent acting; developed characters; an overall sense of craftsmanship and eerie atmosphere make THE LAST EXORCISM a movie that horror fans have very much been asking for.

At this point, you may know the general gist of LAST EXORCISM: Reverend Cotton Marcus (Patrick Fabian) has been performing sham exorcisms for years, but since its heightened popularity and heightened injury and death rate (especially involving children), Cotton has begun to question what he does and sets out to expose himself and others. Upon blindly picking a letter from his stack of mail, Cotton and his documentary crew—Iris (Iris Bahr) and Daniel (Adam Grimes)—head to a very rural corner of Louisiana where Louis (Louis Herthum) believes his daughter Nell (Ashley Bell) to be possessed.

Director Daniel Stamm and writers Huck Botko and Andrew Gurland do an incredible job in the pacing and set-up of the first two acts. The first giant chunk of THE LAST EXORCISM is a decidedly unhorrific section in which you're often laughing and enjoying your time spent with the characters. Fabian creates a great personality in Cotton Marcus. Not a stereotypical, brooding priest with lost faith, Cotton is very much a showman of a reverend, oozing confidence and pep and refusing to let his guilt weigh him down. Instead, he looks forward to revealing his tricks and schemes, believing that even though possession isn't real, he has helped many who believed they were held captive through a sort of placebo effect.

One of the best scenes in the film comes when Cotton performs his initial “exorcism” on Nell. Through very clever editing, the audience becomes privy to the show he puts on to soothe victims’ souls and minds. While incredibly entertaining on a surface level, the scene is also what makes the rest of the movie so effective. The name of the game in THE LAST EXORCISM is subversion. Cotton breaks down every aspect of his so-called ritual, calling out almost every cliché we’ve come to expect from movies of this nature and quickly destroys them. It’s very akin to SCREAM in the way it’s able to build the fear it broke apart back up. By acknowledging the conventions and even THE EXORCIST, Stamm gives the proceedings a much more real-world feel. And when the first exorcism doesn’t exactly work, Cotton and the audience find themselves asking if they’re dealing with a possession at all, or just a very unhinged girl, which in some cases can be even more terrifying.

By setting the film in the South, which is often branded the “real America,” the filmmakers are addressing very topical subjects as well. Cotton and Nell’s father Louis partly embody the ongoing war between science and religion in this country and the dangers that arise when neither party will budge or even attempt to see circumstances through opposite eyes. Cotton, the reverend oddly enough, is consistently calling for Nell to undergo psychiatric testing while her father is so steadfast in not only his worship of God but his belief that Nell has been stolen by the devil, that he’s willing to shoot his own daughter to save her soul. It’s that push and pull amidst Nell’s own intense and frightening fits that keeps suspense high throughout. It’s also the standout work from Bell who stunningly transitions from the sweetest, most genuine teenage girl to the worst of malevolent forces.

Much has been made about THE LAST EXORCISM’s polarizing climax, and it is absolutely something that you will love or hate. In the case of this writer, I was very much on board with where the film goes in its final moments. While I won’t spoil it, the next bit may still be more than you’d like to know, so be cautious. The point many are making against the finale is that it undercuts the reality and gravitas of everything that came before. I’d say the argument is a valid one, as it’s not hard to see what its detractors mean, however the place it goes with such full force and gusto is exciting, exhilarating and to me, part of building back up the fear of what was earlier subverted. There is also the inevitable question of just who was supposed to have scored and so successfully edited this “documentary”? The case could be made that it’s a mystery, or just that mockumentary or not, it’s still a narrative film and never posited itself to be truth, or try to trick audiences into believing so (along the lines of BLAIR WITCH).

No matter what you walk out thinking, there’s little room to deny THE LAST EXORCISM is very well executed in almost all areas, something that should be highly commended. Despite what you may think, it’s not hopping on the POV bandwagon, and it’s not simply another riff on THE

EXORCIST. It’s a very good, creepy and effective stand alone, original horror film, and as I said earlier, that makes it something genre fans have been calling for all year. Get out there and check it out.

For more on THE LAST EXORCISM, check out Michael Gingold's Fanstasia Fest review and our talks with actors Patrick Fabian and Ashley Bell,
here
and
here
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