

“INSIDIOUS” (TIFF Film Review)

Written by Chris Alexander

Thursday, 16 September 2010 00:28



As a lifelong horror-film enthusiast, I am forever chasing the dragon for the almighty fright. As you age and the divides between fantasy and reality become sadly concrete, it's very difficult to totally suspend your disbelief and immerse yourself in the supernatural, to have films about “things” from the ether affect you. But oh, how you want them to.

Having just exited a Toronto International Film Festival screening of director/editor James Wan's latest straight-up genre film, *INSIDIOUS*, feeling weak in the knees yet exhilarated, I'm overjoyed to report that Wan, once again working from a script by *SAW* partner Leigh Whannell, did it. He got me. He brought me back to that sweet, shuddery dark place I cowered in as a kid, where anything was possible, when I believed in the monster in the freaking closet or under the bed and when I was afraid to fall asleep, because I might get trapped in one of those abstract recurring nightmares that jolted me awake in the dead of night with tears in my eyes and my heart pounding in my tiny chest. The ones that, when the day came, made me glad of it—and I would then go and draw the “things” I saw in my sleep, tell people about them and try to find others who had similar experiences.



Which is why I'm now sitting in a café, clacking away at my laptop and feverishly trying to belch out a review of the film. I want horror fans to *know* that there is a picture out there that genuinely cares about craft, that desires to give you those old-fashioned spectral scares, to shake your spine and terrify you, but still ensure that—when the lights come up—you walk out *inspired*

, not battered down by the terror on screen. *INSIDIOUS* is that film, a work of pure Gothic imagination and wonky dread. It's like entering one of those rickety carnival haunted-house

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rides that whip you around, that trot out the “things” that scream bells in your ears and reveal some new dark horror around every whiplash-inducing turn...

OK, I'll slow down. The plot.

Real-deal actors Rose Byrne from 28 WEEKS LATER and HARD CANDY's Patrick Wilson—it always helps to have good actors anchoring a phantasmagoria like this—star as a lovely middle-class couple who move their three children into a beautiful old detached Victorian home to start a new life. As mom vainly attempts to work on her music compositions while minding her infant daughter, her middle child has an accident in the attic and falls into a mysterious coma. Months pass, and not a single medical professional can determine why this darling little boy refuses to wake up. And yet slowly, surely, “things” start to appear. Ghosts. Monsters. Bumps and screams in the night. Harsh whispers on the baby monitor. Bloody handprints on the bedsheets. Driven past the point of comfort by these unexplained phenomena, the family moves house—only to discover that the “things” have followed them...

To reveal more would be to kill the midsection hiccup that turns INSIDIOUS from an elegant, serious-minded, creepy-as-all-hell ghost story into a very strange, eccentric POLTERGEIST-by-way-of-Roman-Polanski supernatural drama, and then into a full-blown Mario Bava soaked spookshow freak-out. Wan has sculpted an immaculate, imaginative and completely unpretentious genre work that delivers the goods in an offbeat, unique way—but of course, that's to be expected. SAW was familiar yet original, an amalgam of classic pulp and contemporary tech. Same with the underrated DEAD SILENCE and the even more underrated vigilante epic DEATH SENTENCE. With INSIDIOUS, I can now proudly proclaim James Wan to be a major master of horror. An old-world craftsman who lets sound and music (right from the opening credits, we're not only watching the film but listening to it) propel his prowling camerawork and meticulously timed jump scares. The man seems to love what he does, and that passion for the macabre drifted through the theater like the relentless dry-ice mist that smothers the film's last reel.

Sure, there are a few narrative glitches and a couple of stumbles of silly dialogue, but Leigh Whannell's script is otherwise sound. And with a visual and aural palette this rich and a tone this terrifying, as a horror fan (many of whom are, let's face it, more than a bit jaded), you must allow yourself to overlook those trivial flaws.

I'll leave you with this: there was a moment in INSIDIOUS where—I swear to God—my *blood*

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chilled

felt it. I breathed in deep and my damn blood turned cold. And I honestly cannot remember when this has ever happened to me.



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