

## “DEVIL” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold  
Friday, 17 September 2010 12:47

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M. Night Shyamalan didn't script or direct DEVIL—he was just one of the producers, and it's based on his story—but since this is the film that may forever be remembered for turning “From the mind of M. Night...” into a viral punchline, it's worth noting that DEVIL (billed as “The Night Chronicles 1” on screen, if no longer in the marketing materials) does mark something of a change in direction for the beleaguered auteur. Rather than build up to a heretofore concealed, big-surprise plot twist, this movie takes the different if ill-advised tack of explaining in advance what it's all about.

Before we even meet him, a Philadelphia office-tower security guard named Ramirez (Jacob Vargas) helpfully explains in voiceover just how the devil likes to take out the souls he's targeted, and that his appearance on Earth is heralded by a suicide. Next thing you know, *wha m!* —

someone has leaped from that tower and landed on a van, clutching rosary beads. Detective Bowden (Chris Messina) is at first puzzled when the corpse-topped vehicle is found at rest beside a two-story building, but soon figures out where the jumper came from. Thus he's on the scene when five strangers wind up stuck in an elevator somewhere around the building's 20th floor, and we already know that one of them is actually Satan in disguise, there to claim the rest of them.



Certainly, it's plausible that any one of the quintet could call hell home, since they're not an especially likable bunch: There's wiseass salesman Vince (Geoffrey Arend), claustrophobic and thus hot-tempered security guard Ben (Bokeem Woodbine), Jane, a snappish older woman (Jenny O'Hara), surly mechanic Tony (Logan Marshall-Green) and a young woman named Sarah (Bojana Novakovic), who, since she actually doesn't have any evident attitude problems, must of course be considered a prime suspect. None of them command much sympathy, and

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thus it's hard to become terribly involved in the question of which one has the devil in 'em—but director John Erick Dowdle and screenwriter Brian Nelson could still have built up some fun/nasty hothouse melodrama had they really stuck with the trapped group. Instead, the film keeps cutting away to Messina, Ramirez and fellow security guard Lustig (Matt Craven) and their assorted efforts to free the captives and figure out what's going on.

Ramirez has a pretty good idea, of course, and keeps trying to explain the dark lord's presence by doing things like dropping a piece of toast on the floor and saying, “When he is near, the toast lands jelly side down.” Soon the lights in the elevator car are going out, then coming back on to reveal that one of the five is now dead, Messina starts probing their backgrounds to uncover their dark secrets and thus determine which of those still living could be responsible for the killings—and it's all just spinning wheels because we already know they're dying for their sins on the way to the hot place, not as part of some terrestrial murder plot.

Since the movie opens with Messina and his AA sponsor mouthing banal platitudes about faith and redemption, it's not giving away too much to note that DEVIL's eventual payoff is as much about Messina reconciling his own crisis of belief as it is concerned with paying off the mystery. The final reel in which all is revealed packs more dramatic punch than the rest of the film, though the conclusion may be a little softer than horror fans would like, even given the movie's PG-13 rating. DEVIL is never really that scary at any point, but it has at least been professionally put together: Shyamalan regular Tak Fujimoto's cinematography is expert, and the performances are all fine given the limitations of the characters (though it's disheartening to see WONDERFALLS' charming Caroline Dhavernas wasted in another too-small role as a co-worker Messina has taken a shine to). And if the story isn't genuinely involving, it's never dull either—DEVIL runs only 80 minutes, which does suggest that material which might have given the drama more depth now resides on the cutting-room floor.

DEVIL would have been much-improved if the filmmakers had simply forgotten about everyone outside the elevator car and kept the focus solely on the imprisoned fivesome, keeping us on edge with them as they realize what's happening on their own instead of spoon-feeding the audience all the answers. Perhaps Shyamalan et al. didn't trust the audience to sit still for an entire feature that never leaves one cramped location, but if so, they—and everyone else—oughta see BURIED, which wrings gut-twisting suspense by staying entirely inside a single coffin. More on that one soon...



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