

## “CASE 39” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold  
Friday, 01 October 2010 00:43

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It's a good day for young actors in horror films. While Kodi Smit-McPhee and Chloë Grace Moretz are excelling in LET ME IN (see review [here](#)), Jodelle Ferland gives pretty good evil child in CASE 39, which she filmed when she was 11 and is now being released just as she's on the verge of being old enough to drive.

Beyond the typical regime-change excuses, it's hard to know exactly why Paramount kept CASE 39 on the shelf for so long. It's not great, but lots worse in the horror genre has come out from the major studios in the past few years, and the delay gave ORPHAN the chance to steal some of its thunder. Like that film, this one is about an initially sweet-seeming young girl who proves to be sinister once ensconced in a new home; unlike that one, CASE 39's best sequences are in its first half.

Renée Zellweger stars as Emily Jenkins, a social worker who's overburdened with cases and is initially resistant to taking on yet another, this one involving Lilith Sullivan (Ferland), who hasn't been showing up for school. An interview with the Sullivan family reveals her parents to be a little odd, perhaps, but there are no outward signs of abuse. The more Emily learns about the situation in Sullivan household, however, the more she becomes concerned, until she gets a frightened phone call from Lilith in the middle of the night and hurries over, met there by her detective friend Mike Barron (Ian McShane). The resulting setpiece is the movie's best, aggressively staged and shot by director Christian Alvart (fresh off the German serial-killer thriller ANTIBODIES at the time, and who went on to last year's sci-fi shocker PANDORUM).



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Edward and Margaret Sullivan (played by ubiquitous Canadian actor Callum Keith Rennie and Kerry O'Malley, both convincingly haunted) seem to believe there's something terribly wrong with Lilith, but to Emily, of course, she's all sweetness and innocence. So much so that Emily, who hasn't previously considered herself parent material, decides to take the girl in rather than send her to a group facility. Everything's peachy at first...until Lilith starts talking back, asking Emily's child-psychiatrist boyfriend Doug (Bradley Cooper) what scares him...and Emily visits the now-vacant Sullivan house and discovers triple bolts on the inside of the couple's bedroom door...and inevitably, people start dying.

The screenplay by THE CRAZIES' Ray Wright becomes predictable before too long, though it also sets up a nice battle of wills between Emily and Lilith once the child starts asserting herself as the little mistress of her new home. Zellweger convinces more at the outset as a concerned caregiver than in her more brittle and hysterical moments later on, but she carries the story reasonably well, and Ferland—who made more horror films before reaching adolescence than most actors do in their entire careers—brings the right mix of sugar and spice, sarcasm and spitefulness to Lilith. The dark depths of her personality are conveyed more persuasively than the explanations of the exact nature of her evil; it's never entirely clear whether she herself is malignant or she's just a conduit for some outside demonic force.

Alvart, while peppering the movie with too many obvious jump-scares, demonstrates a good eye for visual menace, and takes the material seriously even in moments when it's hard for the audience to do so. CASE 39 is at its best when exploiting the tension between the fresh-faced child Lilith appears to be and the malevolent force we come to know she really is, particularly in that interview with Doug; when characters start dying, the scenes occasionally suffer from less-than-perfect CGI. One of the best moments of terrorization, in fact, involves old-fashioned physical FX as Emily barricades herself in her room and Lilith tries to get in, using more force than any normal little girl ever could.

CASE 39 might have been better if the filmmakers had resisted going all the way to making Lilith a true monster, and done more with Emily simply suspecting that the Sullivans had the right idea about her dark nature, questioning her own instincts and finding that all her training is no match against a true problem child. Still, as obvious as it becomes, there was no reason for CASE 39 to be so neglected by its own studio parent.



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