

“THE RITE” (Film Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

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“He who fights with monsters might take care, lest he thereby become a monster,” wrote the philosopher Nietzsche in his anti-religion screed BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL. The new possession drama THE RITE, opening tomorrow from New Line Cinema, makes for an unfortunately literal demonstration of this maxim.

Michael Kovak (Colin O’Donoghue) is a young initiate to the priesthood, grappling with doubt and dwindling faith in the church. The head of Michael’s seminary sends him to Rome to study rites of exorcism, in a bid to bolster his flagging beliefs. There, Michael encounters Father Lucas (Anthony Hopkins), a veteran of over 2,000 exorcisms and a renowned expert on physical manifestations of the diabolical. Michael works alongside Lucas as he administers to several young victims of possession, but is eventually faced with a true test of faith when he himself must confront a victim of demonic intrusion.



“What did you expect? Spinning heads? Pea soup?” Father Lucas admonishes his pupil after they’ve delivered the disappointingly unspectacular rites of exorcism to a teenage girl. The first two-thirds of THE RITE chide the audience in the same way Lucas chides Michael, the movie seemingly determined to distance itself from exploitative satanic clichés by taking a somber, restrained tack with the subject. To THE RITE’s discredit, its restraint eventually collapses; whether following the “true events” that the movie makes a spurious claim of being based upon or a mandate from the producers to boost the scare quotient, the movie’s low-key tone shifts desultorily and ends up contradicting itself. Now we get photocopies of hoary old possession gags, all done before in better movies. Electronically lowered voices muttering blasphemies, blank contact lenses blotting out eyes, sinister prophecies coming true, the vomiting up of odd objects...any of this sound familiar?

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Like Morgan Freeman, Hopkins is one of the few actors in Hollywood capable of bringing an effortless gravity to his roles, and with *THE RITE* he starts off in charming, magnetic form. At a certain point, though, Hopkins is foolishly allowed to sabotage his performance with some truly awful hambone histrionics; you can almost hear director Mikael Hafström shouting out from behind his monitor, urging Hopkins to “give us that unblinking glare, now do that whispery Lecter voice.” Co-star O’Donoghue clunks along well out of his depth, and his wan screen presence wilts pitifully up against a gurning, churning Hopkins during the film’s climax.

Still, the acting is probably the least of *THE RITE*’s problems; the worst are the lame scare pieces set to a clumsy, invasive score by Alex Heffes. A room full of harmless, supposedly evil frogs is hilarious enough, but is trumped by the trotting out of the dustiest jump-scare imaginable in 2011—a screeching cat leaping into frame. Oh, where would derivative horror movies be without pissed-off felines bouncing off the walls?

More evidence to condemn January as a release-date graveyard for celluloid stillbirths, *THE RITE* squanders its promisingly understated beginning with lapses in logic, a mishandled Hopkins and unwisely reheated scares borrowed from the unimpeachable *EXORCIST*. Up against this many blunders, *THE RITE* hasn’t got a hope in hell.



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