

“DREAM HOME” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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For anyone who’s ever said they’d kill for the right place to live, your horror heroine has arrived. Lai-sheung (Josie Ho) goes to just that extreme—repeatedly—in DREAM HOME, a Hong Kong horror feature that blends assorted styles and tones into one nastily entertaining package.



In an Asian cinema scene still largely concerned with the supernatural and serial-killer crime/horror epics, DREAM HOME (playing midnights in New York City this weekend and in other cities over the coming weeks via IFC Films) harks back to the down-and-dirty Category III fare of decades past. Its approach to bloodletting, however, is less reminiscent of the outrageous splatter of prior HK fare and more closely recalls the fleshy grotesqueries of French shockers like HIGH TENSION and INSIDE. And it’s all woven into a topical scenario, laced with satirical humor, in which the real-estate market has become so viciously competitive that landlords resort to letting snakes loose to scare out tenants.

In the midst of all this, Lai-sheung just wants to own an apartment with a view of Victoria Harbor like the one she grew up enjoying, and has been saving up from her job as a loan officer. We know early on that money won’t be enough to get her that apartment, as director Pang Ho-Cheung, working from a script he wrote with Derek Tsang and Jimmy Wan, opens with Lai-sheung’s murder of a security guard in the building she covets. Apparently believing there’s nothing like a few dead bodies to drive property values down, she embarks on a rampage of bloody murder that’s intercut with the circumstances that led her to that decision (including her home life in a shabby flat she shares with her sick father, and her affair with a married man), plus flashbacks to her childhood.

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Yes, it's another time-hopping exercise (with subtitles helping sort out what's what and when's when), but the gimmick works here to allow gradual realization of its antiheroine's motivations while getting right into the thick of her horrific deeds. There's a nicely edgy juxtaposition between her shy, retiring manner at work and elsewhere in her life and the ruthlessness with which she slays her victims, and the more we learn about her, the more we can kinda sorta sympathize with her plight. The delicate balance is upset a little bit by the graphic cruelty of a few of the murder sequences, most notably one involving a pregnant woman—but on the other hand, it's hard not to root for Lai-sheung when she takes out a bunch of obnoxious, drug-abusing punks in the film's lengthiest death setpiece.

Ho, who was also one of DREAM HOME's producers (via her 852 Films company, which—to add an extra level of irony—gets its monetary backing from her real-estate-mogul father Stanley), handles the tricky central role with aplomb. (She won Best Actress at the Sitges film festival last year for her performance; also honored were Vitaya Deerattakul and Andrew Lin for their brutally convincing makeup FX.) Unlike many female slashers, sexual trauma and/or characterization aren't central to her role; she's simply a victim of circumstance who claims victims of her own to get out of those circumstances. Also breaking with typical genre traditions, Pang and cinematographer Yu Lik-Wai avoid showy optical tricks or desaturation, maintaining a colorful palette that's appropriate to a story about a young woman who just wants the good things in life—no matter what the cost.



{comments on}