

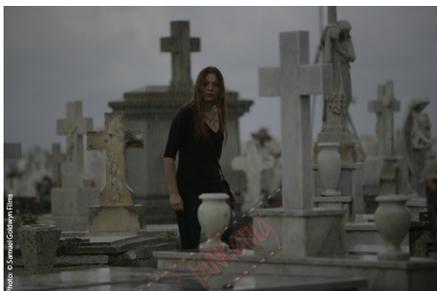
“THE CALLER” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 26 August 2011 17:52



THE CALLER asks the question: Can a movie centered on menacing phone calls still work in a day and age when everybody’s got cell phones with cute/whimsical ring tones, as opposed to the old days of the comparatively room-shaking bells on stationary phones? The answer is yes, when one such model is still present in an apartment the movie’s heroine moves into.

In THE CALLER, opening in limited release today from Samuel Goldwyn Films, that apartment is located in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and the heroine is Mary Kee (Rachelle Lefevre from the first two TWILIGHT films). She arrives there in the wake of a very non-amicable divorce from her slimeball husband Steven (Ed Quinn), who’s more affectionate toward their dog than toward Mary (coincidentally, a similar pooch is a point of contention in another breakup in OUR IDIOT BROTHER, also opening today). Mary’s attempts to recover psychologically and establish her own life are boosted when she clicks with good-looking college teacher John Guidi—no surprise, since he’s played by another vampire-franchise veteran, TRUE BLOOD’s Stephen Moyer—but are crimped when she starts receiving mysterious calls on that old rotary phone from a woman seeking someone named Bobby.



At first, Mary thinks they’re wrong numbers, or maybe crank calls; there’s no one named Bobby there. Then it seems that the woman on the other end of the line, Rose (the voice of DRAG ME TO HELL’s Lorna Raver), is just lonely and needs someone to talk to. She claims that she, too, is in the throes of a troubled relationship, so Mary might have found in her a psychological soulmate. Director Matthew Parkhill, in concert with Lefevre’s empathetic performance and working from a script by Sergio Casci, initially establishes an affecting “relationship” between the two women, as Mary tries to encourage Rose to find the empowerment that she herself is struggling to achieve. The paranormal wrinkle is that Rose claims to be calling from 1979—and the horror element comes in when the friendship sours and Rose reveals a nasty streak. But if she is in fact communicating from over three decades ago, she can’t pose an actual threat to

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Mary—can she?

Suffice to say that soon Mary doesn't know who should be feared more, Rose or the still-lurking Steven—and for a time, the movie doesn't seem able to decide either. While Parkhill and cinematographer Alexander Melman maintain a consistent visual tone of gloom and impending menace, the story's focus becomes uneven around the second act, as the subplots duel when they should be walking hand in hand. Speaking of which, the burgeoning romance between Mary and John has its awkward moments as well—from the dialogue in their first encounter to the fact that, after he enthusiastically offers an explanation for the time paradox in one scene, he acts like a disbeliever in another that follows. And the music by Unkle and Aidan Lavelle tries way too hard to deliver the spooks and accentuate the jump moments.

For all that, THE CALLER slowly but surely begins to weave a spell as the true nature of the peril Mary faces comes more into relief. It's a clever conceit on Casci's part, one that leaves Mary truly helpless to stop it, and it's accentuated by Raver's line deliveries, as she proves she doesn't need a gypsy accent—or to even be visible—to be menacing. While the manner in which the plot plays out requires that the nastiest developments also occur offscreen, Parkhill makes the situations just as scary as if Rose were able to actually show up to physically terrorize Mary. Crucially, he makes you believe in the fantastical premise by grounding the rest of the movie in reality, and tautly executes the twists and turns in Casci's scenario. And even though it's never foregrounded, there's an extra element of tragedy to the fact that, in a way, Mary herself helped encourage Rose's transformation into malevolence.

THE CALLER is one of those movies that sneaks up on you, in part because for a while, it seems like you can tell just where it's going to go, and the supporting characters don't seem like they're going to be any more than exactly who they appear to be from their first scenes. In some cases, they're not—but when their ultimate roles in the story are revealed, the payoffs still get under your skin. The movie may seem like it's going to be a generic domestic thriller at the start, but by the time it reaches its conclusion, it has ventured into some pretty uncompromising places.

