

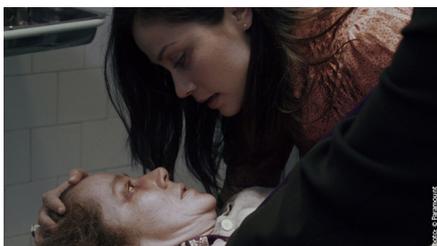
“THE DEVIL INSIDE” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 06 January 2012 10:36



Endings are always a challenge when making horror films, but especially in the found-footage subgenre, where coming up with a conclusion that satisfies both the particular demands of this technique and the basic expectations of the audience can be a tricky balancing act. I bring this up not because this review will discuss any details of THE DEVIL INSIDE's wrapup, but because it will likely be a dealbreaker for many viewers.

The crowd at the screening this writer attended, who seemed generally with the movie for its preceding running time, did not care for the ending. Boy oh boy, did they not care for it. While it doesn't violate the story's internal logic, or betray the technique with which it's been told, it's sudden and abrupt and leaves the viewer hanging, adding insult to injury by telling us to find out more by going to a website. It may satisfy the aesthetic aims of writer/director William Brent Bell and co-scripter Matthew Peterman, but on a dramatic level, for anyone who has invested in the characters and their situation, it feels like a cheat.



For the rest, THE DEVIL INSIDE suffers from following in the wake of THE LAST EXORCISM and THE RITE, echoing the general approach of the former and some of the storytelling specifics of the latter, though it was apparently filmed before either one came out. And even those two movies wrestled (THE LAST EXORCISM more successfully) with the fact that possession films have a pretty limited number of tropes, the bulk of which were done to perfection by THE EXORCIST nearly 40 years ago. DEVIL INSIDE inverts the premise of the William Friedkin/William Peter Blatty film; rather than the concern of a mother for her afflicted daughter, it deals with a young woman, Isabella Rossi (Fernanda Andrade), trying to uncover the truth about her mom, Maria (Suzan Crowley).

The movie opens with police walk-through video revealing the bloody aftermath of Maria's

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attempted exorcism, which left three clergymen and -women dead. Years later as the story proper begins, Maria has been packed off to a psychiatric hospital near Rome, and Isabella heads over there with documentary cameraman Michael (Ionut Grama), determined to find out whether she’s truly inhabited by a demonic presence, or just insane. The debate between those two schools of thought regarding “possessed” individuals is engaged in a scene set inside the Vatican-sponsored school for exorcists—a potentially fascinating subject that, just as in *THE RITE*, is touched on here but quickly and frustratingly relegated to the background. (A mock documentary entirely devoted to this college...now there’s a project rife with possibilities, albeit one that nobody’s likely to touch at this point.)

Isabella falls in with two believers in the existence of demonic evil, Father Ben Rawlings (Simon Peterman) and Father David Keane (Evan Helmuth), who soon reveal to her that they’ve got a secret exorcism business going on the side. They believe Maria’s got the devil in her, but just to show Isabella what they’re up against and prepare her for what may well be a traumatic experience, they take her along on another case: a young woman, inevitably, with an especially active demon infesting her. This is a first of a couple of significant casting-out setpieces in *THE DEVIL INSIDE*, and they follow the familiar patterns and behavior: the possessees exhibit super-strength and imaginatively obscene vocabularies, know the dark secrets of those attempting to cure them and twist their bodies into torturous positions (courtesy of a credited contortionist named Pixie Knot).

The mock-docu style almost always lends a certain amount of immediacy to even the most prosaic conventions of the horror genre, and Bell employs it well during *THE DEVIL INSIDE*’s rituals, using plausibly motivated multiple camera angles to deliver a certain amount of punch and skin-crawling moments that sometimes overcome the feeling that we’ve seen all this before. Crowley and Bonnie Morgan, who plays the subject of Ben and David’s first exorcism, really throw themselves into their roles, though as in all post-*EXORCIST* movies, the line between scarily overwrought behavior and chuckle-inducing histrionics gets crossed more than once. The vérité approach also pays shaky dividends during the too-plentiful conversational sequences; while the performances are decent in and of themselves, the dialogue often comes off feeling scripted rather than natural in this presentation, sometimes giving the odd effect that we’re watching a filmed play.

THE DEVIL INSIDE tries to engage in notions of faith and belief, with David in particular worrying over his and Ben’s rogue activities. Ultimately, these don’t amount to much as the film hurtles toward the culmination of its brief (76 minutes plus some very slow-scrolling end credits) duration, and additional time might have been profitably spent further developing the characters. And there definitely should have been more to the ending, to provide true closure to both these people’s struggles and the experience of watching them. Instead, the filmmakers sign off leaving the audience in the lurch. Whatever possessed them to do that?

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