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THE WOMAN IN BLACK marks a change of pace for star Daniel Radcliffe, for director James Watkins and for Hammer Films, which co-produced it. The British studio made its rep decades ago for bringing heretofore unseen full-color excess to screen horror, while WOMAN flies in the face of today’s FX/gore-driven fare by aiming for quieter yet palpable chills.

Given the old-fashioned approach and period setting, it’s a surprise to note that the Susan Hill-penned novel THE WOMAN IN BLACK is based on was written as recently as 1982. The story, adapted for the screen by KICK-ASS’ Jane Goldman (there’s another change of pace…), embraces the tone and temperament of Victorian-era ghost fiction, telling of a haunting engendered by a terrible wrongdoing and a tormented man who discovers it. Set at an undisclosed point in the early 1900s, it centers on Arthur Kipps (Radcliffe), a young lawyer reeling from the recent death of his wife, which has left him to raise his 4-year-old son Joseph (Misha Handley, Radcliffe’s real-life godson) as best he can—which is not necessarily very well. His grief has also impacted on his job, and when he’s sent out of town to sort out the papers of a deceased client, he’s warned that if he doesn’t make good on it, this assignment may be his last.

Radcliffe, only 21 when he made the film, might at first thought seem too young for the role of a man with the weight of his work and family tragedy on his shoulders, but from his earliest scenes in WOMAN IN BLACK, the maturity the audiences watched him grow into over the course of the HARRY POTTER films is very much in evidence. His Arthur carries the demeanor of a person who has been aged before his time by his circumstances, and seems haunted even before he arrives at the spirit-plagued rural town of Crythin Gifford. The chill in the air of this oft-rainy village is nothing compared to the frosty reception Arthur gets from the locals, who seem anxious to hide secrets and protect themselves—especially their children. The only friendly welcome comes from Samuel Daily (Ciarán Hinds), the richest man in the area and possibly the last rational one too.

Watkins’ previous directorial credit, the bad-kids shocker EDEN LAKE, also dealt with the hostility that greets outsiders to a rural area, with an efficient brutal grittiness that stands in great contrast to the subtler, classical pacing he applies here. What the two films have in common is that Watkins does a great job establishing the environment, and Tim Maurice-Jones’ cinematography and Kave Quinn’s production design for WOMAN are exemplary, suffusing the film with gloomy atmosphere and colorful detail, complementing the excellent location choices. Chief among these is Arthur’s ultimate destination, Eel Marsh House, situated at the end of a curving road through a bog area that becomes submerged for a period of each day. While poring over documents in the old place, Arthur begins to sense he’s not alone, and has visions of the eponymous female spirit—sometimes right in front of him, but more often out of the corner of his eye.

Watkins has great fun teasing the audience with glimpses of the Woman in the far corners of the frame, as Arthur makes his way through the half-lit, knickknack-crammed rooms and discovers evidence revealing what she’s doing there. The film’s centerpiece is a long, eerily sustained sequence in which Arthur, who has decided to work through the night at Eel Marsh House, is confronted by all manner of scary apparitions. More than just playing older, Radcliffe’s real challenge in THE WOMAN IN BLACK was to carry many scenes in which he’s the only (living) character on screen, reacting without dialogue, and he handles every one with great aplomb. Kudos also to Jon Harris’ well-timed editing and Marco Beltrami’s score, which helps raise goosebumps without overwhelming the visuals.

Once Arthur confirms the source of the haunting and sets out to lay it to rest, THE WOMAN IN BLACK settles into a familiar rhythm that’s satisfying if not quite as compelling as the film’s first hour. The basics of its plot have been told many times before, but it’s the details that make such a story work, and here that includes the supporting performances. Hinds, with his long face and measured delivery, is perfect as a man trying to keep from being worn down by the

tragedy around him, and Janet McTeer makes a strong impression as Samuel’s wife—enough to make you wish she had more than her couple of significant scenes. There’s just enough of the Woman herself (played by Liz White), though, to make her a creepy, ever-ominous presence while preserving a sense of mystery about her, complemented by the just-ghastly-enough viasge bestowed upon her by the FX team. Like the movie named after her, the Woman in Black makes a frightening impression that doesn’t require her to get in your face.