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INTRUDERS is going to frustrate a lot of people. It’s as stylish and well-produced as any Hollywood thriller, and with a conventional story, it probably could have made a satisfying movie. Instead, this third feature from director Juan Carlos Fresnadillo (28 WEEKS LATER) strives to be remarkable, sacrificing straightforward thrills in order to grasp at deeper meanings.

As the film’s second half gradually reveals the true nature of the story, many audience members are going to tune out as they realize INTRUDERS uses the language of horror movies without ever really being a horror movie itself. Your appreciation of the film will hinge entirely on your appreciation of that method, and hardcore genre fans are likely to feel cheated. Unfortunately even for open-minded viewers, the film never quite makes a compelling point. Despite effortlessly honest acting and individual scenes that draw you in, INTRUDERS ultimately feels small, with abstract stakes that seem to lower exponentially the longer the film plays.

In the broad strokes, the story follows John (Clive Owen), a British construction foreman with a close relationship to his 12-year-old daughter Mia (Ella Purnell). When Mia finds yellowing notebook pages stuffed in the trunk of a tree on her grandparents’ country property, she learns the unfinished story of Hollowface, an apparition that eventually emerges from the closet to attack her. Mia’s flinty mother Susanna (the stunning Carice van Houten, from BLACK BOOK and BLACK DEATH) chalks this hooded bogeyman up to a child’s imagination…except John can see Hollowface too.

Simultaneously, the action follows Juan (Izán Corchero), a young boy in Spain who is also tormented by Hollowface, terrifying his mother (Pilar López de Ayala) and concerning a local priest (Daniel Brühl of INGLORIOUS BASTERDS, another in a uniformly strong cast who shows up for a couple of scenes and isn’t given much to do). The scares develop with rich, moody atmosphere and stylized but ostentatious CGI, but the heart of the movie is the excellent performances by Owen and Purnell, who is as natural and sympathetic as a child actor can be. INTRUDERS is like a textbook definition of a handsome film; Owen is one of the few charismatic leading men who can convincingly convey a tormented psyche, and the movie gets a lot of mileage from his ability to be a strong and nurturing father in one scene, and like a helpless child himself in the next.

Then the twists come, and while it is refreshing that they don’t consist of obligatory turns for the sake of surprise, these revelations are in service of a story which just never connects. INTRUDERS is a movie about fear, but assumes that we’ll care about characters wrestling with fear without genuine consequences. That and other ineffective creative choices pile up, like never paying off the priest’s storyline, or revealing a true surprise (one hiding in plain sight, which makes a lot of sense once you think about it) within a scene featuring some of the least convincing age makeup ever captured on film.

It’s also odd to point this out, as defenders of uncompromised content, but there is literally no need for INTRUDERS to be rated R. Make no mistake, the rating is earned and fair, considering the occasional profanity and some revealing shots of van Houten that, in hindsight, could have just as effectively been framed modestly. It seems strange to recommend that a film should have aimed for a PG-13, but with a relatively bloodless story that focuses so squarely on the relationship between a young girl and her Daddy, it seems a little wrongheaded to alienate what might have been a receptive teen audience.

It’s almost tempting to give INTRUDERS a positive review, based on what works, and to be

encouraging toward the filmmakers for taking a chance. It’s a valiant effort, but a premise like this one needs to be utterly gripping to work at all. INTRUDERS isn’t cookie-cutter and has its heart in the right place, but it also handily illustrates why different doesn’t automatically equal good.