

“THE LAST EXORCISM PART II” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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THE LAST EXORCISM PART II is the second contradictorily titled sequel to come out in as many months, after THE HAUNTING IN CONNECTICUT II: GHOSTS OF GEORGIA. I'm not the first to ask whether this means the original now has to be called THE SECOND-TO-LAST EXORCISM, and I probably won't be the last to say the first should have remained the only.

THE LAST EXORCISM transcended the by-now overfamiliar conventions of its subgenre by giving them a fresh immediacy via the found-footage approach, and by focusing not on a heroic priest but a sham exorcist suddenly confronted by an actual case of possession that draws him in way over his head. Another of its strengths was the ferociously committed performance of Ashley Bell as afflicted young Nell Sweetzer, who has somehow survived the conflagration that ended the previous movie and is first seen in this one cowering in a couple's home late one night in a feral state. Sent to a New Orleans halfway house for troubled girls, the formerly sheltered, deeply religious Nell tries to adjust to a world she's never known, while seeing signs that the demon Abalam is still out to get her.



Bell is once again the best thing in THE LAST EXORCISM PART II; made up and photographed to resemble a grown woman in a child's body, she's convincingly innocent, curious about practices and pop culture her family would have condemned as sinful and tormented by paranoia all at once. She demonstrates an adroit sense of physical performance

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too; when Nell’s hand unconsciously caresses her face and body while she sleeps, you believe the appendage is possessed and acting of its own volition. There are a couple of mildly creepy moments in the early going, as when a street performer done up as a motionless silver soldier shows a bit of demonic life in Nell’s presence. Unfortunately, when one of her friends implores the guy to “just do something already,” she could well be anticipating the pleas of the audience as the movie goes on.

Eschewing the handheld urgency of its predecessor, *THE LAST EXORCISM PART II*, under director/co-writer Ed Gass-Donnelly, makes the major miscalculation of dialing down its approach, to the point of enervation. Gass-Donnelly favors long, stationary takes that are apparently intended to create a sense of eerie stillness, but instead drain the life out of the film. The ennui is only encouraged by the conventionality of the scare tactics—dark figures suddenly passing in front of the camera, a barking dog lunging out of nowhere, formerly friendly characters speaking in funny voices and the old reliable loud blast of music when a character unexpectedly enters the frame. There’s also a scene of mass bird suicide that has the unfortunate if accidental timing to come a week after an identical, more effective setpiece in *DARK SKIES*.

Equally disappointing is the lack of the intriguing supporting characters that supported Nell in the original *LAST EXORCISM*. Everyone around her in the sequel is a type with no shading: the concerned but firm operator of the halfway house (Muse Watson, in a sympathetic change of pace from his villainous turns in the *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* films and others), the nice boy (Spencer Treat Clark) who takes a shine to Nell and so on. A particular missed opportunity lies in the house’s other girls; the only one we get to know at all (and it’s not much) is Nell’s roommate Gwen, a frizzy-haired kewpie doll played by *MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE*’s Julia Garner, and while they all could have represented the attractions and risks of the outside world, the only temptation any of them offers is Gwen sharing heavy metal music with Nell on her iPod.

Another scene with possibilities that go unexplored has the girls discovering YouTube footage of Nell’s past possession and exorcism, which could have had intriguing dramatic and thematic repercussions. Instead, it motivates only a truly awkward scene between Nell and a dorky male fan of the clip on the street, and the film otherwise forgets about it—as it does the girls at this point. Instead, a heretofore unseen voodoo priestess (Tarra Riggs) suddenly enters the picture, informs Nell that Abalam is close to completely overtaking her and sets up the inevitable exorcism sequence, which is as listless and familiar as much of what has come before it. Bell doesn’t get to do as much of the contortionist tricks here as she did so strikingly in the original—certainly, there’s nothing resembling the poster’s depiction of her body and limbs twisted into the shape of a number 2. That image is a fitting representation, however, of a movie that bends over backwards trying to follow up a film that really didn’t need a sequel—and

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winds up falling flat.

