

“THE EXORCIST” (Blu-ray Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

Saturday, 30 October 2010 01:12



Like the Beatles' WHITE ALBUM, THE EXORCIST is one of those titles so durable and impervious to aging that fans should just resign themselves to updating their copy whenever format technology advances. “The scariest film of all time,” declares the packaging of Warner's new two-disc EXORCIST Blu-ray release, and it's hard for Fango to disagree.

Recent history has burnished the movie's reputation even more. One only has to consider the debacle of the fourth EXORCIST installment(s) to see just how easily the same subject matter can veer into becoming a ponderous, talky bore (the Paul Schrader version) or a campy slice of cheese (the Renny Harlin version).



THE EXORCIST's plot and characters are now familiar pop-culture lore: a young girl possessed by a/the devil, a mother drawn to the Catholic Church in a desperate battle to save her daughter's soul, a young priest struggling with a crisis of faith. For those lucky enough to have yet to experience THE EXORCIST, be assured that the movie is a master class in slow-building tension; every moment is saturated with dread. Close to 40 years on, it remains a unique balancing act of adult drama, understated production design and shocking, taboo-defying blasphemy. With apologies to Tatum O'Neal and Anna Paquin, THE EXORCIST also boasts the finest-ever film acting by a child; Linda Blair's brave performance as the possessed Regan (assisted by the pack-a-day croak of Mercedes McCambridge) remains an astonishment.

THE EXORCIST is an indisputable classic no matter what the format, but how does the film stand up to the Blu-ray treatment? The widescreen transfer is bright and sharp but reveals quite a bit of grain, as is to be expected with a film of this age. The real benefit here comes with being able to appreciate the detail now apparent in the fantastic Dick Smith makeup pieces, especially the artificial aging of Max Von Sydow as Father Merrin. The Oscar-winning sound design finally

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feels unlocked with the proper multichannel stereo setup, as layers of sinister groans and whispers can now be heard underneath the more overt effects. The packaging is another huge bonus, as the set comes encased inside a glossy hardback book. The 40-page tome is made up of essays and cast bios set alongside photos of THE EXORCIST’s many iconic images.

To leaven the sting of Blu-ray double-dipping, Warner has included three all-new featurettes to go along with the hi-def transfer. The first featurette is compiled of cinematographer Owen Roizman’s behind-the-scenes footage, including the execution of the practical FX and makeup tests. These clips are interspersed with new interviews with Roizman, Blair, director William Friedkin and writer William Peter Blatty. By this juncture, there isn’t a great deal left for them to say about the production that hasn’t been discussed before, but the previously unseen set footage will be a treat for hardcore fans. Also amusing are the interviewees’ repeated insinuations that THE EXORCIST is anything other than a horror movie (Blatty takes the prize with his “supernatural detective story” tag. Sure, so that would make JAWS an “aquatic police procedural”?)

Next is a short presentation on the film’s shooting locations, and here viewers will realize that THE EXORCIST comes from a rare place: While almost all of the acknowledged modern horror classics stemmed from indie or self-financed origins, THE EXORCIST was a major-studio-backed A picture, with the accompanying budget and ambitions. Thus, when the script’s setting called for scenes in northern Iraq, Friedkin had the resources to box up his cameras and ship off to the actual Iraqi desert to shoot the film’s prologue.

Finally, there is a quick interview piece regarding how the expanded 2000 version, sometimes erroneously called “The Director’s Cut,” came about. Friedkin, fresh off a Best Director Oscar win for THE FRENCH CONNECTION and also enjoying a fearsome *enfant terrible* reputation around Hollywood, was certainly entitled to final cut and submitted his preferred version of THE EXORCIST in 1973. The 2000 version restores scenes that Blatty felt belonged, including the jarringly misplaced “spiderwalk” bit that interrupts the movie’s careful and measured slow burn. (Regan charges down the stairs in a physically impossible contortion and vomits blood at her mother, and in the next scene they’re back at the psychiatrist’s to give hypnotherapy a shot?) The subliminal computer enhancements that Friedkin added to the new version are nothing more than a distraction. Both versions are included here, and despite the 1973 cut appearing on disc two, (similar to when STAR WARS was released onto DVD with the theatrical cut shunted onto a bonus disc), Fango would like to take this opportunity to plead with the neophytes out there to watch the shorter, bleaker and ultimately superior ’73 cut first. Treat the 2000 version as a curiosity.

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THE EXORCIST has accumulated a number of additional extras on previous format releases, and Warner has graciously included many of them on the second Blu-ray. We get the filmed intro from Friedkin, additional interviews with him and Blatty, the commentaries for both versions, trailers and promo material, plus THE FEAR OF GOD, the excellent 1998 BBC documentary covering the entire EXORCIST production.

Honestly, any quibbles with this release are minor. Here is the classy packaging and expansive presentation that a four-skull classic like this deserves. THE EXORCIST may be a child of the devil, but even under the harsh magnifying glass of hi-def, it remains immaculate.

MOVIE: 🦇🦇🦇🦇

BLU-RAY PACKAGE: 🦇🦇🦇🦇

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