

Fresh from the Archives: "BLACK CHRISTMAS" (2006; DVD Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Thursday, 16 December 2010 11:46



Last week, we did a Fresh from the Archives look back at the BLACK CHRISTMAS remake (click [here](#) to read that article), and people chimed in with their comments both for and against the redux. Here are Michael Gingold's thoughts on the film, which he reviewed back when the DVD came out in April 2007.

Just when you thought a horror remake couldn't get any worse than Dimension's PULSE, along came the same company's BLACK CHRISTMAS (Weinstein Company/Genius Ent.) to race it to the bottom of the 2006 barrel. Pointless, crass and bereft of suspense, it's an insult to both general sensibilities and the memory of Bob Clark's 1974 original. Particularly offensive is the fact that (like the HITCHER redux that followed it into theaters four weeks later) the film's existence seems motivated neither by any evident inspiration of how to improve on its predecessor, nor by the financial imperative of cashing in on a familiar name—the first film, while a cult fave, is hardly a household title *à la* TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE. No, the new CHRISTMAS seems to have been greenlighted solely because rehashing someone else's good idea is easier than coming up with a fresh one.



To be sure, writer/director Glen Morgan has wrought one significant—and counterproductive—change on Clark and scripter Roy Moore's chilling scenario. Instead of positing "Billy," the villain who terrorizes a houseful of sorority girls with scary phone calls and murder, as an unknown, unseen presence whose identity and motives remain frighteningly elusive, the update, in true 21st-century tradition, devotes pages of dialogue and copious flashbacks to explaining just who Billy is and what made him a psycho killer. Thus there's no mystery left—and what's worse, not only is the audience fully aware of Billy's history, the imperiled characters are as well, and discuss his "legend" at great length before the action starts. Part of what made Billy's telephonic taunting so scary in the '74 film was that the sorority sisters had no idea who was tormenting them, or from where (as it turned out, *from inside the house!*); here, everyone talks about Billy so much, you get the feeling they'd be disappointed if he *didn't* show up.

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Oh, and Billy's mayhem is significantly bloodier than it was when Clark staged it (even more so on the unrated DVD), and a couple of the gore gags—notably an early one involving Christmas cookies—have a rude charge to them. But the extreme unsubtlety starts at the beginning and gets old fast, with no sense of tension to support it or people to care about as they're victimized. The occupants of Delta Alpha Kappa house aren't even distinguishable types; the only way you can tell some of them apart is by which recognizable actress is playing them (*oh no, the girl from BUFFY is gonna get it!*

). The fact that a good deal of their minimal dialogue consists of them sniping at or about each other doesn't help in the sympathy department.



It's debatable how much of the blame for the way the film turned out can be laid at Morgan's feet, however; judging from observations of those who attended a test screening and comparisons with the final feature, an awful lot of alterations were made to his original cut. Most notably, one of the murders was moved up to the head of the movie, and a lengthy series of scenes dramatizing Billy's escape from the "Clark Sanitarium" (wink wink) was added to the first act. Putting aside the fact that this sequence is pretty lame on its own, its juxtaposition with the action back at the sorority house pretty much blows the movie's attempt at a surprise revelation toward the end. And speaking of which, a new climactic setpiece was also appended to the final act, and proves to be thoroughly ridiculous, at one point apparently homaging that noted slasher-film classic DR. GIGGLES. The final product is an utter mess, a complete mishmash—but what could you expect from a feature with 16 credited producers, executive producers and co-producers?

Under the circumstances, the title of one of the DVD's two half-hour behind-the-scenes featurettes, "What Have You Done?", seems only too appropriate. Yet combined with the companion piece "May All Your Christmases Be Black", it provides a revealing look at the motivating factors behind the movie, or at least Morgan's decision to do it and the approach he took. In "Christmases", he candidly admits that he fell into a depression after the box-office failure of his stylish and more suggestive WILLARD remake, and that with CHRISTMAS he's employing "jack-in-the-box-type scares which I f**king hate, but the audience wants them."

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There's also the unspoken suggestion that CHRISTMAS' extreme gore was another concession to box-office tastes, and Morgan closes the documentary out by stating, "This movie makes no money, I'm on film jail Death Row." This honesty is surprising and rather refreshing, and it's only a shame that it couldn't have been applied to an examination of the postproduction tampering here (as it was on the WILLARD DVD's standout documentary, created, like CHRISTMAS' featurettes, by Julie Ng).

It's not all gloomy on the making-ofs, though. In between assorted cast and crew promising that this will be its own film, separate from Clark's (well, they certainly achieved *that*), "What Have You Done?" sprinkles in plenty of enjoyable anecdotal footage—from a script supervisor blandly reading Billy's phone dialogue on set to actress Lacey Chabert getting around on crutches after her foot was slammed in a door the first day of shooting (an injury treated by co-star Kristen Cloke's doctor stepfather!). "Christmases" contains a most entertaining digression devoted to focus puller Dean Friss, who was pressed into service playing a villainous onscreen role, plus husband-and-wife Morgan and Cloke discussing their working relationship and producer James Wong justifying the physics of the icicle-through-the-head death.

While reports from that test screening suggest that around 15-20 minutes of Morgan's version hit the cutting room floor (the final feature runs only 83 minutes plus credits), only about seven minutes of deleted/alternate footage are compiled on the disc. These run the gamut from a moodier opening sequence to a more explicit "international" version of one character's death, plus another variant murder take which weirdly contains shots from *inside* the crystal unicorn used as a weapon! Morgan's original ending, which contains no mayhem and directly homages Clark's film, is included alongside two other rejected finales which are just as violent—and inane—as the one which appears in the final feature. The movie itself has been given a sharp 2.35:1 transfer with lush colors and an effective 5.1 soundtrack, but this amounts to visual and aural wrapping paper on a package with nothing inside; it's the supplements that are the real gift here.

MOVIE: 🍅👤👤👤

DVD PACKAGE: 🍅🍅🍅👤

{comments on}