

“THE LAST EXORCISM” (DVD/Blu-ray Review)

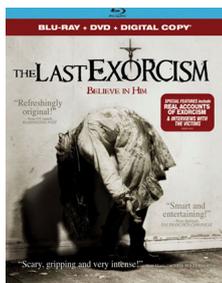
Written by Jack Bennett

Saturday, 08 January 2011 14:03



THE LAST EXORCISM was one of the more pleasant surprises of 2010, a year in which horror seemed to alternate between overproduced, overwrought exercises and low-key stories that seemed to stretch an opening act to feature-length. THE LAST EXORCISM straddled the two approaches, resulting in a compelling dramatic allegory that doesn't forget the entertainment value of a gratuitous mutilation.

Shot in the style of a well-produced documentary, the story follows a shameless but sympathetic Louisiana preacher, Cotton Marcus (Patrick Fabian), as he attempts to discredit demonic possession on camera. When he leads a documentary crew to the rural home of a religiously devout widower with troubled teenaged children, Cotton's skepticism is challenged by what's best described as some freaky shit. Financially successful if not universally loved, THE LAST EXORCISM still overcomes the numerous pitfalls of found-footage horror, never straining to commit to being a documentary but still maintaining the illusion until the unfortunately preposterous ending. The movie ultimately employs nothing more innovative than smart characters and a well-cast contortionist (Ashley Bell as the apparently possessed Nell), but watching it again on Lionsgate's new DVD and Blu-ray confirms the strength of the acutely observed moments and Fabian's intriguing, layered lead performance, resulting in a decent, entertaining horror flick.



It's clear from the special features that THE LAST EXORCISM is not a film by Eli Roth, though it was marketed heavily on his name and he comes across as an enthusiastic and involved producer. While Roth continues to be unproven as a master craftsman, he undeniably fills the role of Hollywood's most valuable horror fan, and his most notable participation in LAST EXORCISM (originally titled COTTON) seems to have been finding the project at an early stage and helping it come to fruition. A brisk behind-the-scenes featurette gives credit to director Daniel Stamm, who previously helmed another fake docu, A NECESSARY DEATH, and highlights the collaborative nature of what began as a low-budget independent production. Deserved accolades are heaped on the cast, and it's clear that what worked best about the film came from deliberate creative choices, but typically the special features go overboard to praise the film.

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The Blu-ray includes three commentaries (the first two duplicated on the DVD), including a good-natured producers' track with Roth, Thomas Bliss and Eric Newman discussing the history of the production in detail. This track is packed with information, but will mostly be valuable only to aspiring filmmakers (Roth occasionally treats the proceedings like a seminar for hungry low-budget producers). The second track features Stamm, Fabian, Bell and co-star Louis Herthum, all four talking with energy and humor as they express constant delight at being involved in the film. The third, Blu-ray-exclusive commentary features an anonymous “haunting victim” referred to as Stephani, and her “spiritual warfare counselor.” Together they emphatically relay Stephani's story of demonic possession while dryly profiling the onscreen characters and action (joined by a clinical psychologist who sounds uncomfortable relating her own more grounded experiences).

The pair are also given the spotlight in a “Real Stories of Exorcism” featurette, intercut with professionals bringing a more convincing historical perspective to the rite. The statements by Stephani and the spiritual warrior combined with the producers' use of creepy music and onscreen warnings all blatantly bait the audience to be skeptical, especially when Stephani insists that her own lack of spiritual belief “invited” a demon into her home. If you're already dubious about the reality of demonic possession, Stephani's counselor stating, “I believe that Jesus Christ has given me the authority to cast out demons,” will not convince you.

This featurette and that last commentary unfortunately skew the extras toward the tone of someone insisting that their campfire ghost story really actually happened to someone they know. The more interesting extras reveal the approach of the filmmakers, such as Stamm's emphasis on humorous characters and the lengths to which the performances were kept natural. Also among the supplements are audition footage for all the leads, which play like sketches of the eventually realized characters, though Bell's audition for the possessed Nell is so powerful, it actually eclipses what appears in the finished film (and her relieved smile when she breaks character is priceless). A Cannes teaser trailer reveals that the film was financed with Bell in the role before the other actors were cast, and all the extra footage of her is so unnerving, it calls into question why the movie was saddled with a musical score, arguably the only real stylistic blunder in the final product.

While the fact that most of the Blu-ray's bonus features are identical to the DVD's will be refreshing to fans yet to abandon the latter format, it does slightly devalue the Blu-ray. Beyond the extra audition footage and superfluous third commentary, that disc's real advantage is the format itself. While handheld camerawork and intentionally commonplace production design aren't the prettiest showcase for 1080p, the image is so sharp and vivid, the viewer feels present at the scene of the titular ritual. Another benefit of the Blu-ray is the enhanced, DTS-HD

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audio; an early scene in which rocks are thrown at the protagonists' van will have you leaping up to check your windows. Sound design continues to be one of the most crucial characteristics of horror movies, and THE LAST EXORCISM on Blu-ray is another case for cranking up the volume on your home theater. Yet even viewed in simple left-right stereo on a computer desktop, THE LAST EXORCISM holds up as a simple, well-made horror movie.

MOVIE: 🍅🍅🍅👁️

BLU-RAY PACKAGE: 🍅🍅🍅👁️

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