

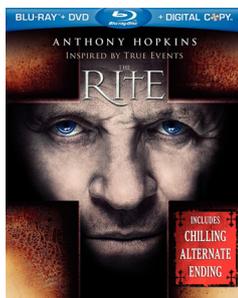
“THE RITE” (DVD/Blu-ray Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Tuesday, 17 May 2011 13:48



The most-quoted line from THE RITE (out today on DVD and Blu-ray from New Line/Warner Home Video) is the admonishment by Father Lucas Trevant (Anthony Hopkins) to his pupil Michael Kovak (Colin O’Donoghue): “What did you expect? Spinning heads? Pea soup?” Clearly this is an irony-tinged attempt to position THE RITE as a realistic study of the exorcism phenomenon, but by this point it’s already clear that the movie has few tricks up its sleeve that haven’t already been displayed in numerous other films on the subject.

Actually, THE RITE sets itself up quite a bit earlier as a grounded treatment of the oft-sensationalized subject, during a very matter-of-fact discussion of possessions and exorcists between Michael and his seminary-school superior Father Matthew (Toby Jones). Michael has been suffering a crisis of faith, but Matthew, having witnessed the young man’s concerned, heartfelt response to a road accident (a more confidently staged bit of action than any of the supernatural shenanigans that follow), believes a trip to Rome and enrollment in a Vatican-sponsored exorcism school there might help restore his belief. That’s where things promise to get interesting, and this reviewer got excited: I would have loved to follow Michael through the classes and coursework involved in training to administer the sacred rites, and become immersed in the details of this real-life college of demonology.



Alas, it isn’t to be; not for nothing is Michael Petroni’s screenplay credited as being “suggested by” Matt Baglio’s book THE RITE: THE MAKING OF A MODERN EXORCIST. Michael has barely begun studying under a faculty that includes Father Xavier (perfectly cast Ciarán Hinds, also briefly raising hopes) before his expressions of skepticism lead him to be assigned to receive more one-on-one instruction under Father Lucas. We already know that Lucas is going to be unorthodox and eccentric simply because he’s played by Hopkins, and he proves it by doing things like answering his cell phone in the midst of one ritual. Eventually, of course, things become more serious as Father Lucas and Michael are confronted by a case of possession that the latter can’t explain away in rational/psychological terms.

It was probably too much to hope that a mainstream film about exorcism instruction could avoid

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veering away from personal drama to become one more trip down possession street, and that it could find an entirely fresh way to deliver those goods. When it comes to the horror content of THE RITE, we’ve simply seen it all before, from the barfing up of unexpected objects to the Ten Plagues-style natural signifiers to the distorted faces and growled profanities to the red-eyed demonic donkey (OK, that one’s not necessarily typical; it’s just silly). Michael’s journey from disbelief to devout over the course of his experiences is equally familiar, and performed none-too-compellingly by O’Donoghue, while the “surprise” possession of a key character is a foregone conclusion long before it actually arrives. Mikael Hafström directs with the same straightforward embrace of the genre’s requirements that he brought to the superior Stephen King film 1408, but here the material lets him down, providing only a shaky framework on which to hang his atmospheric craft (including properly moody cinematography by Ben Davis) and serious point of view toward touchy material.

That atmosphere is solidly captured in the discs’ 2.4:1 transfers, with strong detail even amidst the murkiest visuals, especially on the Blu-ray. The sound is strong too, with the Blu-ray’s DTS-HD MA audio delivering a good dose of sonic creeps. The only supplement appearing on both is a collection of deleted scenes, which include a couple of nicely played moments by Rutger Hauer (as Michael’s seen-in-flashbacks mortician father) and Hopkins (in a conversation with Michael establishing more common ground between them), though none of them are particularly essential.

Unique to the Blu-ray is what’s billed as a “chilling alternate ending” that might just give you a mild shiver, and a featurette called “THE RITE: Soldier of God,” which explores the movie’s true-life basis. Here again, hopes went up, then down; I was hoping for a thorough look into the process of exorcism education, yet while the on-camera speakers—the filmmakers and cast, Baglio and Father Gary Thomas, the subject of his book—reveal a few interesting tidbits, such as the fact that the courses include one on satanic influences in media and entertainment, and that Thomas himself also apprenticed with a more experienced exorcist, the piece is too brief to provide more than a superficial look at a subject that could surely fuel a full-length documentary.

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