

“THE DEVIL’S ROCK” (DVD Review)

Written by Jack Bennett

Friday, 24 February 2012 14:11



THE DEVIL’S ROCK, a so-so supernatural flick from New Zealand, doesn’t feel fresh so much as uncommon. The broad story strokes are recognizably horror formula, as we watch a pair of friends enter unfamiliar territory and get in over their heads at the hands of sinister forces. The details, however, are all skewed.

The setting is the European theater of WWII, the unwitting innocents are a capable pair of Allied soldiers on a covert mission and the menace results from Nazi soldiers dabbling in black magic. The movie certainly spends much of its time resembling a dry-humored war movie, similar to David Twohy’s BELOW, a ghost story that was often indistinguishable from a submarine thriller. While THE DEVIL’S ROCK (out on DVD from Entertainment One) suffers from endlessly talky and mystifying scenes, the strong atmosphere, suspense and plentiful blood and guts do result in some occasionally diverting but never particularly inspired fun.



The story opens just before D-Day, with a pair of Kiwi soldiers, Grogan and Tane (Craig Hall and Karlos Drinkwater), descending upon a German stronghold in the Channel Islands for a covert sabotage mission. The two encounter visibly spooked Nazis (one appears to beg to be rescued) and the hangdog-featured Colonel Meyer (Matthew Sutherland), who transitions from antagonist to ally in the face of a common threat. This mutual enemy appears as either the

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image of Grogan’s wife or a red-skinned demon, played in both incarnations by graceful, hungry-eyed Gina Varela.

The cast does solid work and the details create a claustrophobic, promising premise, but just when you think the goods are about to be delivered, we get dialogue sounding like that in any number of possession/exorcism movies and emotions that simmer when they should explode. Andrea Possee’s beat-you-over-the-head musical score leaves something to be desired, and seems to be doing work that director/co-writer (and WETA FX artist) Paul Campion didn’t, pushing the soundtrack toward intensity while the images onscreen remain low-key. While the movie never really grabs you, the filmmaking is confident and assured, only betraying the low budget via the cramped sets and otherwise serviceable makeup FX shot and lit so as to be unconvincing. So THE DEVIL’S ROCK is hit-and-miss, but what movie can be all bad when, during an incantation, the straight-faced exorcist shouts “F**k you, hell-whore!”

To the disc’s credit, those who give the film a chance will be pleasantly surprised by a trove of interesting extras focused on hands-on indie horror filmmaking. Notable among them is an “Alternate Multicam Takes” segment, with footage of scenes from multiple camera angles playing simultaneously for comparison to the final edit. Perfect for aspiring filmmakers, the feature provides a virtual lesson in editing choices. Also cool is “VFX Breakdown,” which shows the stages of certain composite shots from storyboard to final color grading. The shots range from landscapes to a muzzle flash to the very floor of the room in the climatic confrontation, all infinitely more convincing than the cramped sets and prosthetics. That the composites never register as FX while you watch is another example of the low-budget ingenuity on display, expanding the scope of an unfortunately limited story.

The other supplements include a low-energy but informative director’s commentary, a reel of chummy, you-had-to-be-there outtakes and a cheerful behind-the-scenes featurette that emphasizes the good-humored crew through every stage of production. The features don’t redeem the movie, but do reveal THE DEVIL’S ROCK to be the sum effort of some committed troupers working as a team. Even middle-of-the-road films require enormous effort, and the cast and crew of THE DEVIL’S ROCK appear so selfless and good-natured, it makes you want to root for them. You also wish they made a better movie, but there’s enough potential on display to be hopeful for next time.

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