

“PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 22 October 2010 01:17



The people behind PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2 clearly learned a lesson from the debacle of BLAIR WITCH 2: BOOK OF SHADOWS; they’ve hewed scrupulously close to the original film in style and tone. The result is probably the best true sequel that could have been made to PARANORMAL ACTIVITY, without avoiding the pitfalls that come with creating a close-but-not-too-close approximation of a singular success.

Inevitably, there’s more of everything in this sequel: Three writers (Michael R. Perry, Christopher Landon and Tom Pabst) were employed to knock the script into shape, and there’s a somewhat larger cast of central characters and a wider array of cameras. In what is actually largely a prequel, Katie Featherston and Micah Sloat reprise their same-first-named roles, here frequently visiting her sister Kristi (Sprague Grayden), the latter’s husband Daniel (Brian Boland) and his teen daughter Ali (Molly Ephraim) in their large and well-appointed Carlsbad, CA house. This trio is first seen—through the family camcorder—coming home from the hospital with newborn baby son Hunter, but a few scenes later they’re taping a far less joyous event: the aftermath of an apparent break-in that has left the place trashed. (At the screening Fango attended, the audience’s first gasps and groans greeted the sight of Dan’s 50-inch TV with its screen shattered.)



Feeling vulnerable, Dan and Kristi have a complex security system incorporating numerous video cameras installed in the house, and it is through these that we witness a good deal of the ensuing events. An opening title establishes the movie as compiled police evidence, and from the start, director Tod Williams sets up a visual rhythm—beginning each night with the same surveillance shots, the better to upset the sense of security later on. For sure enough, signs begin to crop up that the family has more to fear from a presence within the house than from

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outside invaders: loud unexplained noises, objects moving by themselves, etc.

Similar to the first PARANORMAL's director, Oren Peli (who remained on as a producer for this one), Williams gets a lot of mileage out of long, unblinking static shots, setting up the audience to wonder when the whammy's coming and inviting them to search the frame for something supernaturally out of place. (That experience will no doubt be enhanced for those who catch the movie in its IMAX engagements.) He times the jolts well and, along with the writers, even has some fun with the form, including a running joke involving a misbehaving pool cleaner. In this film follow-up, familiarity doesn't necessarily breed contempt; Williams knows how to play on expectations, pay them off and occasionally subvert them.

What hasn't carried over is the play on primal fears that gave Peli's movie its most deep-seated chills. The lengthy shots of Katie and Micah, asleep and vulnerable as subtle visual evidence revealed the unseen specter creeping into their room and under their sheets, were unnerving expressions of every childhood and adult terror of what might be lurking under the bed or elsewhere in the dark as you slumber. There are no such moments in PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2, save a couple of creepy bits in baby Hunter's room; Williams and co. may have desired to avoid simple duplication of the original's *frissons*, but their thrills remain on a more basic funhouse level. And a few of them seem familiar: there's a setpiece or two straight out of POLTERGEIST, and a late POV venture into a confined space presented in night-vision green is a little too close to [REC] for comfort.

Also missing is the sense of complicity involved in having Micah set up a camera to tape his and Katie's own nocturnal experiences, and having their own worst fears confirmed; the overhead security cams offer a more anonymous point of view. A few of their tapes are referenced and watched by the characters after the fact, as part of a traditional horror-movie dynamic developed between the pragmatic and skeptical Dan and the increasingly fearful Kristi and Ali—which leads the otherwise effectively naturalistic performances into occasionally too movie-ish territory. PARANORMAL 2's screenplay is more successful in incorporating and expanding on its predecessor's story, adding intriguing new wrinkles and revelations regarding what's happening to this extended family and why, and hinting at crucial bits of information via terse lines of dialogue rather than overdone exposition.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2 is a commendable attempt to recapture lightning in a bottle, done with a respect for the original and a clear ambition to give the audience a little more than more of the same. But it also illustrates the perils of following up a movie whose success hinged on such a specific confluence of elements. If you loved the first one, the sequel may well leave you with the same jitters—even though (SPOILER ALERT) you may also find it a relief that it

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concludes with few doors left open for another chapter in this saga.



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