

## Fresh from the Archives: “THE WICKER MAN” (2006; Film Review)

Written by Ryan Rotten

Tuesday, 04 January 2011 12:50

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SEASON OF THE WITCH is opening this Friday, and considering that Dominic Sena’s film features both the star of the 1973 WICKER MAN (Christopher Lee) and the star of the 2006 remake (Nicolas Cage), we thought it would be appropriate to take a look back at Ryan Rotten’s review of the much maligned redux. Oh, no, NOT THE BEES!!!!

As if this year’s crop of horror remakes wasn’t already bad enough (I’m still gorging on holy communion wafers in hopes of purging THE OMEN outta my system), in comes Neil LaBute with a rusty can of gasoline to pour on the fire. Granted, there are positive examples of successful retellings, but THE WICKER MAN, which he not only helmed (strike one!) but contributed to on a screenplay level (strike twoooo!), isn’t one of ‘em. Sorry, Charlie: This retelling is a feeble byproduct of its time that loses any and all of the gut-punching relevance Robin Hardy’s 1973 original set out to accomplish.

The problems begin when Nicolas Cage (strike threeeee! You’re out!), as California Highway Patrolman Ed Maulis, suffers a bit of the ol’ “I coulda saved them!” syndrome following a car wreck that takes the life of a woman and child. To be painfully honest, the problems *really* began, for this writer anyway, when Aaron Eckhart was wasted in a throwaway cameo in the film’s diner sequence. Anyway, while on leave of absence, Maulis’ ex-fiancée, Willow, drops him a line hemming and hawing over a missing child.

*Her*

missing child. He learns she’s living on Summersisle, a remote community off the coast of Washington State that’s apparently existing hidden under the noses of the local government (I’m assuming they took some tips from THE VILLAGE).

Maulis’ arrival is a chilly one at best, and the mostly female population is disconcerted by his presence. They’re a tight-knit matriarchal society who harbor a helluva lot of secrets—a private community that doesn’t normally let strangers roam around their “private” island (this being the case, it’s puzzling why there aren’t any locked doors in their houses). Any men who do live there are relegated to caveman status and mostly work and, at one point, grunt. Nevertheless, Maulis is quickly knee-deep in mystery, pained expressions and dopey dream sequences that were pulled off much better by John Landis’ AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON.

If you’re familiar with the original, you know how it ends, and you can take heart in knowing that the finale is retained for the update, but the soul-smashing, faith-crushing impact it’s supposed

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to have amounts to nothing more than just another modern-movie “twist ending.” A further kick to the nuts comes when LaBute adds a “six months later” epilogue that makes room for two more Hollywood cameos. It’s the ultimate gimmick to distance the audience from the believability of the material if there ever was one—there’s already trouble enough trying to relate to the lead actor (doing his “Cage thing,” if you need to know).



OK, so the infusion of funky fertility songs and crooning pub patrons aside, Hardy’s film is creepy business—the ultimate parable of one man’s belief system encroaching on an entire haven of “old ways.” It’s Christianity vs. paganism. And through the eyes of this outsider, Sgt. Howie (Edward Woodward), we feel the temptation he’s up against and the frustration of conformity. Furthermore, we see how the community of Summerisle works. Therein lies the spooky stuff, because some of their methods are a bit...off. Nothing too jarring, just weird. Through Hardy’s lens, it’s a little bit surreal, too. With the musical additions (which always get a raised eyebrow when you mention them to a WICKER virgin), the viewer is thrust through the whole film suspecting that something real nasty is about to go down. When it eventually does, hoo-boy—it’s a doozy.

LaBute takes a different approach. He abolishes any religious subtext (strike four!) and injects a battle-of-the-sexes theme that’s neither ballsy nor poignant. The truly shocking ideas and voice permeating his freshman and sophomore efforts, *IN THE COMPANY OF MEN* and *YOUR FRIENDS & NEIGHBORS*, have all but dried up. In lieu of this, he adds layer after layer of dull exposition and drab performances that do very little to keep your nerves on edge. Bizarre details that could have been observed as thoughtful, subtle nuances are constantly being announced...

Look, there’s fetuses in a jar. Yikes!

Did you catch that? There’s a large population of twins on this island. Freaky-deaky!

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Wait a minute—did Cage just deliver a judo kick to Leelee Sobieski? Yes, folks, he did!

And so on...and so on. Loading up on lame, in-your-face, supposedly frightening details and setpieces (there’s a scene in a barn, during which Cage nearly falls through the floor, that is about as limp as they come) sorta sucks the air out of the conclusion. But Hollywood apparently believes audiences need a constant thrill-ride experience—something Hardy’s film is not—and so, LaBute answers the call with false dramatic beats and skimpy scares. What do they know, right? The end result: The screening this writer attended, packed wall-to-wall with a lively bunch, was ringing with boos by the time the end credits began rolling.



{jcomments on}