

Fresh from the Archives: “LET THE RIGHT ONE IN” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Thursday, 03 February 2011 10:38



LET ME IN, Matt Reeves' remake of Tomas Alfredson's 2008 film, just came out on DVD & Blu-ray this past Tuesday. Here's Michael Gingold's two cents on the original. Which do you like better? LET THE RIGHT ONE IN or LET ME IN?

The logline on LET THE RIGHT ONE IN makes it sound like a lighthearted YA horror piece: A bullied 12-year-old boy falls in love with the same-aged vampire girl next door. But this Swedish production is so much more than that. For one thing, it's thoroughly adult in tone in texture, and while it's consistently attuned to the youthful state of mind, the film refuses to sentimentalize those concerns. It's a remarkably moving and genuinely frightening evocation of childhood terrors, fantasies and frailties, and it immediately takes its place among the classics of the vampire genre.

Director Tomas Alfredson and scripter John Ajvide Lindqvist (adapting his popular novel) aren't out to subvert or reinvent bloodsucker standards here; the v word is spoken and the conventions are respected, albeit tweaked at times in interesting ways. (The title derives from the traditional trope that a vampire must be asked in before entering a home, though this is probably the first film to demonstrate what happens when one does so without invitation. It's not pretty.) Their undead heroine isn't a monster, though she does monstrous things—yet as played by Lina Leandersson, an accomplished little actress with a haunting adult visage, young Eli always engages our sympathy. She's first met by Oskar (Kare Hedebrant) one cold, wintry night outside the drab apartment building where he lives with his divorced mother, and into which Eli has just moved with Hakan (Per Ragnar), who appears to be her father. It's established early on, however, that Eli is the head of this particular household—and that she requires freshly tapped human blood to survive.

Oskar isn't aware of any of this when he first makes Eli's acquaintance; he just knows he may have found a desperately needed soulmate. A loner who's tormented by his classmates, he carries a knife, entertains violent fantasies of revenge and keeps notebooks full of newspaper clippings about shocking crimes. Some might say he's a budding sociopath or psychopath, but through the sensitive filmmaking and the fully felt performance by Hedebrant (whose pale looks contrast nicely with Leandersson's dark features), a portrait emerges of a troubled young boy simply struggling to survive in an oppressive world.

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That gives him a lot in common with Eli, who with Hakan’s not-always-competent help must sate her hunger for blood without attracting attention. As her body count piles up, complications inevitably ensue, and Alfredson, who has just as much comedy as drama in his filmmaking background, mines some of them for dark humor. One subplot in particular leads to a setpiece that’s a small masterpiece of sick laughs, though as entertaining as such moments are, it’s to the movie’s great credit that these digressions almost feel like distractions. So powerful is the central relationship between Oskar and Eli that you can’t wait for the story to return to them.

Alfredson adopts a naturalistic approach to developing their relationship and their parallel dramas, using long takes and static shots that, combined with Hoyte van Hoytema’s gorgeous cinematography and Johan Soderqvist’s perfectly pitched score, establish a captivating mood. The director is subtle in presenting Eli’s otherworldly abilities (flying, climbing up the sides of buildings), but he doesn’t shy away from the gory details of her feeding, or from moments that might have become prurient in other hands, but here intensify the connection between the protagonists (as when Eli sheds her clothes to get in bed with Oskar). Alfredson’s unemphatic staging of the violent bits, allowing them to speak for themselves rather than tricking them up with visual gimmickry, pays off in potent chills, and there’s one single-take scene that will go down in the genre pantheon—it’s breathtaking in its audaciousness, morbidly funny and gaspingly horrific all at once.

Like PAN’S LABYRINTH, LET THE RIGHT ONE IN is the best kind of genre-blender, a movie that honors and delivers on the expectations of fright filmmaking while expanding its boundaries to explore a full spectrum of emotions. And although he works here on a less fantastical canvas than del Toro did in his own masterpiece, Alfredson nonetheless delivers sights we’ve never seen before (the condition of one recovered body is a brilliant touch) and maintains a mature perspective while staying true to the youth of his central characters. Even though the undead Eli points out that she’s “12...more or less” and Oskar has been made to grow up too fast, it’s a key to LET THE RIGHT ONE IN’s success that it never forgets they’re still kids.

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