

“STRAW DOGS” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

Friday, 16 September 2011 17:14



In a strange accident of timing, STRAW DOGS is opening in the direct wake of a couple of schlock items (SHARK NIGHT 3D and CREATURE) involving citified young people running afoul of dangerous Louisiana hicks. STRAW DOGS, which was shot in Louisiana but is set in Mississippi, is a remake of one of the granddaddies of the backwoods-villainy subgenre (albeit one set in Britain), and the new film's handicap is not necessarily that it's following in the footsteps of a classic, but that so many other, similarly themed movies have followed in the wake of Sam Peckinpah's 1973 shocker.

Peckinpah's STRAW DOGS and John Boorman's DELIVERANCE invented an entire subgenre of films in which civilized folks paid a steep price for trespassing on the rural turf of simpler, more brutal denizens and had to resort to violence themselves to survive, while Wes Craven contemporaneously explored the same idea in THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT (and did so again a few years later in THE HILLS HAVE EYES). Rod Lurie, the writer and director of the 2011 STRAW DOGS, has said he was interested in exploring the material from the point of view of an optimist, as opposed to Bloody Sam's pessimism, but the result isn't conspicuously different from its predecessor, or from the countless subsequent studies about the potential for antagonism lurking within us all.



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Indeed, STRAW DOGS is one of the most faithful reduxes in memory since Gus Van Sant ill-advisedly duplicated PSYCHO. Once again, urbanite David Sumner (James Marsden, taking over for Dustin Hoffman) arrives in a remote community, here called Blackwater, with his wife Amy (Kate Bosworth in the Susan George role), who grew up there. They move into her old family home on the outskirts of town, which has a barn in need of repair, and the crew of locals they hire to fix up the roof is led by Charlie (Alexander Skarsgård), Amy's old boyfriend. A Hollywood screenwriter as opposed to Hoffman's mathematician, Marsden's David tries to make nice with the good ol' boys but can't help being a little condescending and intolerant, while Charlie clearly hasn't lost the fire for Amy, who seems a little ambivalent in her reactions.

The stage is set for simmering class tensions and personal conflicts to flare up, and to his credit, Lurie doesn't simplify the scenario by making his David more sympathetic or Charlie a simple animal. Marsden gives David the right sense of moral superiority even at the expense of likability at certain moments, while Skarsgård's Charlie is the one improvement this STRAW DOGS makes over the previous one. With an effortless Southern accent, the actor (who towers over his co-stars) imbues the role with a certain measure of charm and reason; it's easy to see why Amy was attracted to him before and might find those feelings being rekindled now. There are a few places where his indignation over David's behavior seems rightfully earned, including a scene outside a church where Lurie makes religion a not overly dwelled-upon sticking point.

More crucial to the relocation of STRAW DOGS is the emphasis on this small Southern town's preoccupation with football, which joins the carried-over hunting subplot among the metaphors for violence. This theme allows the older, belligerent town drunk (James Woods in full and fine irascible mode) to be more specifically situated within the local hierarchy: He's the former Blackwater Bengals coach who once led his team to victories his successor is having trouble matching. And of course, Lurie intercuts gridiron bashings with flash cuts of the infliction of more harmful injuries. This bluntness isn't a violation of the original, since Peckinpah was hardly noted for his subtlety, but after four years of TV's FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS among many others, Lurie's addition of the sport as representation of both obsession and bodily damage isn't as fresh as he seems to think it is.

He has also toned down the combative relationship between his central couple, so that a couple of little jabs Amy takes at David seem more petulant than expressions of deep-seated frustration. Similarly, her reaction to Charlie's ravishing of her body—a linchpin of Peckinpah's film, and a lightning rod for the controversy surrounding it—has been tamed. Perhaps Lurie wanted to avoid creeping into misogynistic territory, or at least accusations of doing so, but it puts a damper on the material's more provocative themes.

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The final-reel violence, needless to say, is just as explicit as before, with an equal level of gore to Peckinpah's climax and a bit of additional destruction inflicted upon the house itself. This 15 minutes or so of retaliatory and self-defense bloodshed does pack a gut-punch, and Lurie stages it well. If only 40 years of movies in which ordinary folks defend themselves, their loved ones and their homes by letting their killer instinct out to play hadn't come before, STRAW DOGS would possess more than fleeting visceral impact. Even those who haven't seen the Peckinpah version may feel they've seen most of this before, while those who have will question why anyone felt it needed to be remade in the first place.

