

“THE AWAKENING” (2011; Film Review)

Written by Ashley Thorpe

Friday, 11 November 2011 13:15



Nick Murphy’s THE AWAKENING is a ghost story.

Now, I suspect that for many, this phrase alone carries many preconceived notions. No doubt for some, the annual dose of surveillance-camera shocks have lessened the effect of what was once not merely a source of primal jolts from what was *invading* our lives...but a solemn meditation on what might be

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from them.

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THE AWAKENING, which opens today in its native Britain, is set in 1921—a post-WWI England wherein many of the bereaved and wounded have sought solace in spiritualism. Haunted by the death of her fiancé in the Great War, Florence Cathcart (Rebecca Hall) only believes in the truth, and has consequently become committed to rationally and methodically debunking any such supernatural claims. Yet when she is contacted by Robert Mallory (Dominic West), the schoolmaster of the Rookwood country boarding school, regarding a spectre that is quite literally frightening the children to death, Florence is compelled to take the assignment.



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Once at Rookwood, Florence sets to work, gathering evidence and setting traps to try and reveal any potential schoolboy prankster. And yet, just as she is about to leave, content that her work is done, Florence has a chilling encounter that shakes her reason and emotions to the very core. The children are sent home for Christmas, but Florence is determined to stay on at the house and solve the mystery. She is not left alone, however; three others remain with her: Maud (Imelda Staunton), the matron whose initial request brought Florence to the school; Tom (Isaac Hempstead-Wright), a young child whose parents are unable to care for him over the festive break; and Mallory, who, having recently returned from the war himself, finds himself plagued by visions of his service.

Now, that's as much as I really want to tell you, but suffice to say: Those looking for “YouTube generation”-horror-style stingers should almost certainly look elsewhere. However, those seeking the complexity and sensitivity of Alejandro Amenábar's *THE OTHERS* or indeed Jack Clayton's *THE INNOCENTS* would do well to look here. This is supernatural drama at its very best. There are nods to the jump-scare phantoms of recent years, but tellingly, even these are presented as such with a *purpose*, beyond mere easy fright tactics. The film is laden with red herrings, the narrative playing and rejoicing within the form like a rich, emotional detective story wherein every thread has reason and a payoff—a rare thing indeed.

So many films that label themselves as ghost stories—that is, stories that purportedly question our response to the afterlife and its existence—tend to be very manipulative affairs: We are constantly told what to feel and when, being shoehorned into getting scared. *THE AWAKENING* is a very different animal—less William Castle, more M.R. James—wherein the tension builds slowly, and as it does so the ghosts do not merely pop out of boxes as bogeymen, but are rather woven into the filigrees of the narrative as fragments of the past, and as—perhaps more importantly—*characters*.

For beyond all the supernatural trappings, this is finely acted drama of the first degree, sensitive in its portrayal of an irreparably damaged nation and a childhood scarred by violence. In fact, it's worth noting here that although Murphy (who scripted *THE AWAKENING* with Stephen Volk) won a BAFTA Award for his UK TV drama *THE OCCUPATION* and a wealth of young fans for his work on the hit show *PRIMEVAL*, for a first feature this is an incredibly assured piece of directing.

While it's a celebration of the “classic” ghost tale, *THE AWAKENING* is also an examination of the form's resonance, and how a haunting can be perceived to be a manifestation of damage

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or a flaw in a character’s personality projected upon an environment. In this sense, as much as the 1920s setting and additional period resonance can be attributed to Murphy’s tweaking (Volk’s original setting was a girls’ school in Victorian England), Volk’s writing still shines through here. THE AWAKENING is absolutely a continuation of his previous work (GOTHIC, GHOSTWATCH, AFTERLIFE)—obsessive examinations of why we need our ghosts, and an exploration of the houses we’ve built to trap them.

Like I said...THE AWAKENING is a ghost story. A finely written, finely acted, finely crafted ghost story, and quite possibly one of the finest British films of recent years—but most assuredly one of the best ghost stories of the decade.

