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To the short list of remakes that rep significant improvements over their predecessors, one can add SILENT HOUSE. Adapting last year’s Uruguayan film (a.k.a. LA CASA MUDA), OPEN WATER filmmakers Chris Kentis and Laura Lau have solved a couple of key problems that undercut their source material and come up with a taut and chilling real-time experience.

It helps immeasurably that they cast as their heroine Elizabeth Olsen, who made such a strong impression in MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE last year and here finds herself even more literally trapped in a rural prison. She plays Sarah, first seen in a foreboding overhead shot standing on a lakeside before she and the camera venture into an old house with her father John (Adam Trese) and uncle Peter (Eric Sheffer Stevens). The windows are boarded, the doors are locked and the relationship between the two men is rather tetchy; these only add to the feeling of unease created by the inexorably prowling camera, as Kentis and Lau, following the lead of LA CASA MUDA, tell their entire story as one long, unbroken take. One of their improvements is noticeable early on: Unlike the Uruguayan film’s heroine, Sarah doesn’t proceed through every room as slowly as possible.

After enough benign traipsing through the various rooms, halls and stairways to give us a good sense of the house’s geography (though there are a couple of surprises later in the action), John suddenly disappears, and Sarah is left alone on an upper floor. Well, actually, not entirely alone, as strange noises and fleeting glimpses reveal the presence of others with malevolent intent toward her. It might be a home invasion, or it might be a haunting, but either way, the unwavering focus on Sarah and her point of view keep the explanation elusive for a while—though there are a few clues scattered through the early going, and a couple of gestures that might tip off especially attentive viewers.

In LA CASA MUDA, the major third-act revelation amounted to a cheat, a betrayal of the very stylistic approach that defined the storytelling. While SILENT HOUSE is technically similar in the way events unfold, Kentis and Lau play with perception in a manner that allows them to get away with their eventual explanation of what’s happening to Sarah. The on-the-nose nature of the finale’s action and dialogue jars a bit with the more suggestive, occasionally surreal material that comes before, though in a sense, that’s part of the filmmakers’ point—but no more should be said about that to avoid giving the game away.

What can be said is that Kentis and Lau pull off their central gambit most successfully, stitching together a series of long takes to create a seamless whole. Indeed, much like 3D in some recent films, this element is so smoothly pulled off that one stops noticing it after a while, and it’s the action and performance itself that carry the film. To that end, SILENT HOUSE’s success rests on Olsen’s tremulous shoulders, and she’s more than up to the task of carrying it from first frame to last. It’s an admirable technical exercise—the actress had to nail all kinds of movement, prop and lighting choreography—but again, you forget all that while watching her because you’re emotionally engaged in what she’s doing. Olsen expresses Sarah’s rising and falling terror with aplomb, and is no more effective than when she’s *not* screaming, barely containing her terror while hiding under a table lest she alert one of her stalkers to her presence. The directors and DP Igor Martinovic manipulate the camera to show just enough to get us scared right along with her, and kudos also go to the sound team for the jittery sense of menace lurking just outside the field of view.

Because of the handheld nature of its cinematography, there will likely be a temptation to lump SILENT HOUSE in with the found-footage gimmick that has been all the rage in horror (and has been venturing into other genres lately as well). Yet the aims of the format are different here: We’re not supposed to be watching a documentary (the marketing’s claims of “Inspired by True Events” notwithstanding) or sensing the presence of someone behind the camera. On the other hand, the outcome is the same: SILENT HOUSE takes a familiar scenario—the suburban haunted-house story—and knocks down the formalist walls to never leave its heroine’s side, which proves to be a pretty scary place to be.