

“THE POSSESSION” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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THE POSSESSION is a far more generic title than the film’s original moniker THE DIBBUK BOX, and it’s a transition reflected in the movie itself. What starts out with a fairly distinctive scenario and threat eventually segues into overly familiar territory, though not without occasional chilling pleasures along the way.

The dibbuk box (or dybbuk box) is an object from ancient Jewish folklore, crafted to contain a dark spirit that desires to attach itself to a human host (typically someone pure and vulnerable) in order to take over and assume that person’s life. The dibbuk has only been seen intermittently in movies over the years, most recently in the Coen Brothers’ A SERIOUS MAN (where it was played by Fyvush Finkel) and David S. Goyer’s underwhelming THE UNBORN. Like Idris Elba’s minister in the latter film, coincidentally, one of THE POSSESSION’s principals is a basketball coach—in this case Clyde Brenek (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), who is recently divorced from his wife Stephanie (Kyra Sedgwick) and sharing custody of their daughters, teen Hannah (Madison Davenport) and younger Emily (Natasha Calis). While Hannah deals with her parents’ separation in typical surly fashion, Em remains closer to her dad, so he’s happy to buy the ominous-looking box for her after she discovers it at a yard sale.



From a prologue involving the box’s previous owner, and a moment where she goes into a fit upon seeing Em taking it away, it’s clear the thing is bad news, and Em’s subsequent possession by the demon within it proceeds with as much inevitability as suspense. More captivating are the lived-in-feeling relationships between the Brenek family, which gives the movie a character-oriented grounding for the horrors to come. Morgan, generally seen in more antagonistic parts in films like WATCHMEN and THE RESIDENT, is sympathetic as a father trying to sustain a bond with Em and Hannah while he and Stephanie are growing apart, and he and Sedgwick have a chemistry that puts across a palpable sense of married history.

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The fractured circumstances of the Brenek family also more it more believable that Clyde and Stephanie would mistake the early signs of Em’s infestation by evil for pre-adolescent acting out. The girl stabs Clyde in the hand with a fork at the dinner table, clings, er, possessively to the box and reacts with undue violence when a classmate (Quinn Lord from TRICK ‘R TREAT and REPLICAS) tries to sneak it away from her. There’s also a strange insect outbreak at Clyde’s new house, one of the few occupied homes in a new development (which also gives THE POSSESSION something in common with last week’s THE APPARITION, to which this is certainly superior), providing an early bit of skin-crawlingness for anyone not enamored of bugs.

The more the screenplay by Juliet Snowden and Stiles White (whose credits include BOOGYMAN, like this movie a production of Sam Raimi and Rob Tapert’s Ghost House Films) goes on, though, the more the story’s conventional attributes begin to get in the way of our investment in the Breneks’ plight. Veteran Canadian character actor Jay Brazeau, as Clyde’s professor friend, brings a welcome note of self-conscious humor to the inevitable exposition scene, but we’ve seen Em’s eventual symptoms too many times before for them to have the impact they should. When they become severe that they spur Clyde to action, he heads out to seek assistance from the Jewish community and winds up in a rather laughable recreation of Borough Park, Brooklyn, its streets teeming with Hasidim who seem to be on the verge of bursting into a musical number. Fittingly enough, Clyde’s savior appears in the person of Tzadok, a rabbi’s son played by Hasidic rap/reggae star Matisyahu, who’s introduced listening to music on his iPod and agrees to help rid Em of the spirit tormenting her.

THE POSSESSION’s third act incorporates a good, eerie visual when the girl is given an Em-RI, and director Ole Bornedal stages the climactic action with vigor—almost enough to distract from the fact that it takes place in the most depopulated hospital since HALLOWEEN II. Bornedal’s direction in general is attuned to emotion and avoids sensationalism, emphasizing wide, eerie frames over showy cutting and camerawork. Anton Sanko’s music has its moody/powerful moments as well, though the ominous piano note played repeatedly over transitional cuts to black (kind of a somber variation on LAW & ORDER’s *chung-chung*) becomes an unintentional running gag. Everyone involved with THE POSSESSION clearly aimed to make something with dramatic weight as opposed to mere exploitation, and it would be good to see them reteam on a project that doesn’t get tripped up by *déjà vu*. Certainly, one wants to see further appearances by young Calis, who very convincingly conveys both the possessed Em’s nasty side while also allowing us to see and feel for the terrified child who’s still in there.

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