

“THE LORDS OF SALEM” (TIFF Movie Review)

Written by Phil Brown

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Love him or loathe him, there's no denying that Rob Zombie made a major impact on screen terror since transitioning into directing. His characters from *HOUSE OF 1000 CORPSES* and *THE DEVIL'S REJECTS* became the few new horror icons of the 2000s, while his *HALLOWEEN* duo were among the best projects to come out of the unfortunate remake trend. He's clearly a horror-literate filmmaker with a deep love of the genre, something that *THE LORDS OF SALEM* serves to further emphasize.

In some ways, it almost feels as if *LORDS* (a world premiere at the current Toronto International Film Festival) is an opportunity to answer to the at times unfair criticisms he has received as a filmmaker. Though this is identifiably still a Rob Zombie joint, the aggressive grindhouse influences have been replaced by nods to other, more unexpected horror stylists like Roman Polanski, Ken Russell, Alejandro Jodorowsky and maybe even a splash of John Carpenter in *PRINCE OF DARKNESS* mode.



Yep, this is more of a psychological horror treat that burrows into the brain and tickles with ideas. Gore and horrific payoffs are still plentiful for genre fans; they just come in a more understated and thoughtful package by Zombie's standards, and hopefully that will be enough to win over a few of the naysayers. Sheri Moon Zombie stars as Heidi Hawthorne, a late-night

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radio host in Salem, MA who receives a mysterious package containing a record that she obliviously plays on the air. As soon as she hears the music, it has a physical effect on her, and she starts having odd dreams involving demons and witches from her hometown’s notorious past. Three women (Dee Wallace, Judy Geeson and Patricia Quinn) from her building start obsessing over her in a manner that will seem eerily familiar for anyone who has seen ROSEMARY’S BABY, and things begin to seem generally wrong. It all builds to a disturbingly surreal climax too good to even vaguely describe to anyone who has yet to see it.

Zombie’s usual horror-convention fan-favorite casting is on full display, with the likes of Wallace, Quinn and Meg Foster joining his regulars like Ken Foree, Sid Haig and Michael Berryman. Despite all the familiar faces, though, the movie doesn’t revel in Zombie’s usual self-conscious horror-mashup comedy. The tone is somber, building up dread throughout and leaving the audience on a harsh down note (in the best possible sense, of course). At the center is Moon Zombie, in a fairly challenging role for the untrained actress. She has to play a mental collapse amongst a stockpile of disturbing supernatural shenanigans, and rises to the challenge. She’s been good before, but often able to hide behind comedy shtick and sex appeal. This time, much of the movie hinges on her ability to telegraph a breakdown and portray a drug addict, and she pulls it off, anchoring a movie that could have easily fallen apart with a weak central performance.

This is satanic horror done right, carefully twisting the knife until the big finale without sacrificing scares along the way. Zombie abandons his established boisterous handheld cinematography style in favor of more subdued, creeping long takes to generate atmosphere. Gruesome images still arrive in barrages, just in a more carefully plotted manner, and these moments all the more effective for it. The results are visceral enough for the late-night screening crowd, while also slipping under the audience’s skin in more subtle way. It’s a movie that could only come from a director given complete freedom, without meddling producers fearing the material won’t reach the widest possible audience. Zombie has reached a point where he has earned that level of control, and hopefully, enough people will embrace THE LORDS OF SALEM to ensure he can do it again.

