

“HANSEL & GRETEL: WITCH HUNTERS” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 25 January 2013 10:52



The best thing in HANSEL & GRETEL: WITCH HUNTERS isn't Hansel or Gretel or the witches—though they have their moments—but a character with the deceptively genteel name of Edward. He doesn't have a big part, but he makes a big impression.

Edward is a troll played by FRIDAY THE 13TH's Derek Mears in a very impressive animatronic outfit by Spectral Motion, whose prosthetic work throughout bespeaks an admirable ambition to keep things old-fashioned on the FX side. HANSEL & GRETEL itself varies wildly in tone and approach, veering from the traditional to the modern, from serious menace to snarky comedy (the latter coming as no surprise once you note Will Ferrell and Adam McKay among the producing credits). And the movie announces its grab-bag approach early: Following a prologue that retells, with a horrific straight face, the Brothers Grimm fable of the preteen brother and sister who turn the tables on a cannibalistic witch and roast her alive in her own oven, and a nifty animated main-title sequence, we arrive “many years later” with a sight gag straight out of Mel Brooks.



Instead of men in tights, however, we get siblings in leather and armor: Hansel (Jeremy Renner) and Gretel (Gemma Arterton) are all grown up and devoted to exterminating witches. Their rep is such that when they arrive in the village of Augsburg, they are met by a young groupie, Ben (Thomas Mann) who keeps a scrapbook of their achievements. He's at first a

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distraction and eventually a collaborator in their mission, which involves the disappearances of young children from the area, evidently at the hands of evil sorceresses. Mayor Engleman (Rainer Bock) welcomes Hansel and Gretel's assistance, while sneering Sheriff Berringer (who else but Peter Stormare?) bristles at this threat to his authority.

The resulting conflicts and adventures are pitched by director Tommy Wirkola with the same tongue he kept in his cheek in his breakout Nazi-zombie movie *DEAD SNOW*. Witches zoom on broomsticks and hurl deadly whammies at the heroes in energetic action setpieces, while Hansel and Gretel respond with weaponry and other equipment that's determinedly anachronistic. So is their frequent use of four-letter dialogue, which might have shocked back in medieval times but doesn't really get a rise in this day and age. Hansel and Gretel don't really need it; as played by Renner and Arterton, they cut more than capable action-hero figures—not superhuman, but able to bounce back from any assault and work together to defeat their foes.

There is, of course, more to the backstory that forged them as witch hunters than initially meets the eye, though the ultimate revelation isn't all that surprising, and requires another character to explain it during a lengthy, flashback-accompanied speech. In general, *HANSEL & GRETEL*'s attempts to go anywhere beneath the surface of the characters don't come to much, in part because there just isn't time. Running only 88 minutes (including lengthy end credits), this is yet another film that feels like it was sliced down to the bare minimum in the interest of pacing, and at the expense of any depth that may or may not have been in the screenplay. (It may or may not mean anything that Dante Harper was acknowledged as a co-scripter during production and all the way through the movie's long release delay, but only Wirkola receives onscreen writing credit.)

Among the characters who could have been more fleshed out is Edward—kinda ironic to say, considering how physically imposing he is. Still, he's a lot of fun to watch during the screen time he does have. Famke Janssen, as evil witch Muriel, has a few good moments of menace in and out of prosthetics, but isn't given enough opportunities to really get under the skin of her character's evil. As if knowing he's got limited time to grab the audience's attention, Stormare mercilessly chews the scenery before graphically becoming part of it, and Pihla Viitala adds just a bit of romantic respite as a village girl who bewitches Hansel.

Wirkola plays the 3D to the hilt, hurling weapons and severed body parts in the audience's face, and goes pretty graphic with the gore. His unrestrained approach results in a number of jumpy-fun moments, and the anticipation of them helps keep you watching through a scenario that overall doesn't maintain the same interest. There's a running joke in the movie in which Hansel, having gorged on sugar at the candy house of the witch he and Gretel defeated as

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kids, now has to inject himself with medieval insulin on a regular basis to give himself boosts of energy, and it feels like a metaphor for the film itself.

