

"EVIL DEAD" (SXSW Movie Review)

Written by Aaron Hillis

Saturday, 09 March 2013 15:39



Village Voice and IndieWire writer Aaron Hillis was one of the first to see the hotly anticipated EVIL DEAD at SXSW last night and he kindly submitted this review. Keep reading FANGORIA.com over the next few weeks to get other critiques from FANGO staffers....

More often than not, when the name EVIL DEAD is invoked (like the nefarious, blood-scrawled writings in the Necronomicon Ex-Mortis), it's actually shorthand for the more maniacally funny EVIL DEAD II, writer-director Sam Raimi's nutty 1987 horror landmark that served as both polished sequel and camped-up remake of his equally beloved 1981 debut The EVIL DEAD. Both films have similar setups, as soon-to-be-cult-hero Bruce Campbell and others visit a remote cabin in the woods and accidentally unleash a demonic force, which takes turns possessing and transforming its victims into absurdist, homicidal caricatures of Linda Blair in THE EXORCIST. Though the original film's budget was only a fraction of its successor, the franchise's hardcore fans know its ratio of horror-to-comedy errs more on the side of unnerving terror, its grisliest sequence depicting a young woman raped by the forest itself.

With the producer-credit blessings of Raimi, Campbell and Rob Tapert (one of the original films' collaborators), 2013 delivers the unnecessary but inevitable remake of THE EVIL DEAD we deserve, which may get overpraised on the bell curve that it's not a total turd unlike the recent Platinum Dunes rehashes (THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE, FRIDAY THE 13TH etc.). The new version, aside from racing to become the goriest, gooiest R-rated feature yet made, marks a technically accomplished directorial debut for Uruguyan filmmaker Fede Alvarez, who made a splash with his 2009 sci-fi YouTube sensation PANIC ATTACK!. With a refreshing old-school disregard for CGI fakery in favor of nasty, fleshy, wonderful practical effects, EVIL DEAD flexes a commanding sense of tense, escalating lunacy... once you can get past a plodding first half of stilted exposition and character underdevelopment.

Though Alvarez likened his film to a "rebirth" while introducing his SXSW world premiere, that's too kind for a screenplay (co-written by Alvarez and Rodo Mendez, plus some imperceptible help from Diablo Cody, presumably to punch up their wooden take on English dialogue) that bends over backwards to either play lip service to fans awaiting references or jangle keys to redirect audiences away from the shtick that "this ain't your daddy's EVIL DEAD." The classic Oldsmobile makes an early backyard cameo, the credits feature "fake Shemps" and 1981's plot

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points are mildly tweaked, but there's no disguising that this is just another remake, not a reinvention, and it's missing the idiosyncratic voice and originality that elevates a genre movie to cult legend.

It starts with a promising twist on the five-friends-on-vacation premise: Jane Levy (the film's go-for-broke MVP) is our heroine on heroin, a recovering junkie who has asked her aloof brother (Shiloh Fernandez, too humorless to fill Campbell's giant shoes) and fresh-faced friends (Jessica Lucas, Elizabeth Blackmore, and standout Lou Taylor Pucci as a comically smug, long-haired high school teacher) to hole up in the cabin to help her kick. That addiction theme unfortunately never pans out into anything dramatically richer or metaphorical than an excuse to stay put, as Levy's rants about a sexual-assaulting malevolence outside is chalked up to the desperation of withdrawal. A rotting stink leads the quintet to a blood-smeared basement hatch in the middle of the living room, underneath which lies a chilling sight of dead, strung-up cats, a shotgun and a mysterious package bound in enough barbed wire to warn most: DO NOT OPEN THIS, IT'S "THE BOOK OF THE DEAD," AND JUST AS IT SAYS ON EVERY PAGE, RECITING FROM IT WILL LEAD TO YOUR HORRIFIC DEMISE. Oops, they do so anyway.



Once their hell is unleashed, the beats become a bit too familiar, until a single gut-churning moment of despair finally won over this jaded horrorhound, as Blackmore makes Thanksgiving giblets of her possessed arm with an electric food slicer—complete with a well-timed visual punchline as the limb detaches from one thin ligament. From that splattery mess and on through a dreamlike, blood-raining climax and the most hardcore, tendon-stretching dismemberment of recent years, Alvarez and his crew take sadistic glee in how much they can brutalize their cast yet still maintain a more buoyantly oddball than bleak tone.

Yet while the cast makes the most of one-dimensional roles and the filmmakers prove technicians to watch, if inexperienced writers, there were too many cheap jump-scares and jarring volume-cranking to say EVIL DEAD is ever particularly scary. The sold-out Paramount

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Theatre crowd of over a thousand howling, applauding, hungry fans may have been ready to love this version after the effectively sick tease of a single red-band trailer, but here's hoping Alvarez continues to grow, branch out and truly give back to horror culture with some fresh, revolting new stories.

