

“A HAUNTED HOUSE” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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A HAUNTED HOUSE represents the kind of surprise leading to disappointment that crops up on the movie scene sometimes—the surprise being that it’s not quite as awful as you might expect, and the disappointment that it still isn’t nearly good enough to recommend.

Co-written and co-produced (with Rick Alvarez) by and starring Marlon Wayans, A HAUNTED HOUSE is part of the wave of often cheap-looking movie/pop-culture parodies to follow in the wake of the success Wayans and his brothers had with SCARY MOVIE. This one has the advantage of the cheap look not being a problem, since the found-footage horror subgenre it takes potshots at is defined by its absence of slick production values. The problem is that it doesn’t spend enough time actually parodying the ripe targets represented by PARANORMAL ACTIVITY, THE DEVIL INSIDE and their ilk, content to, for the most part, trot out lowbrow sexual, anatomical, scatological and occasionally misogynist and homophobic gags to distinctly diminishing returns.



Set in an expansive house well-chosen for its resemblance to the home in PARANORMAL 2, the film has Wayans playing Malcolm and Essence Atkins as his girlfriend Kisha, who’s moving in with him for the first time. Non-supernatural trouble starts almost immediately—Kisha won’t put out, and accidentally kills Malcolm’s dog—before strange phenomena lead them to

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determine that the place is inhabited by an evil spirit. In an overplayed but chuckle-worthy sequence clearly inspired by Eddie Murphy’s classic bit about the difference between white people’s and black people’s response to ghosts, Malcolm quickly decides to move out and sell the house, but finds it difficult in today’s market.

And so, cue the assortment of would-be zany characters called in to try to solve the problem. There’s a fey psychic (Nick Swardson), who shares an amusing bit of patter with Malcolm early on but quickly becomes a tired gay stereotype, and a security-camera technician/wannabe TV ghost hunter (David Koechner), whose disbelief at an African-American couple living in such swanky digs isn’t developed into a full-fledged comic idea. Most disappointing of all is a priest, called in to exorcize the eventually possessed Kisha, played by Cedric the Entertainer, who’s given far too little that’s clever to do. None of these characters’ strenuous flailing and riffing is nearly as funny as a long, single-take sequence from an unmoving surveillance-cam point of view, in which Malcolm and Kisha sit in their kitchen, determinedly ignoring the increasingly violent poltergeist activity going on around them.

When Wayans, Alvarez and director Michael Tiddes exploit the humorous possibilities of found-footage spookery in this way, A HAUNTED HOUSE actually delivers the goods. The oscillating-fan bit from PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3 gets a fun spoofing, and Atkins has an amusing physical bit taking off on the PARANORMAL flicks’ fast-forward visual motif. But about seven or eight minutes of guffaws in an 86-minute movie ain’t a great percentage, especially as the inspiration increasingly flags, the groans pile up and the sexist and homophobic attitudes become more pronounced. The desperation becomes most obvious when Koechner and Cedric start running Samuel L. Jackson lines from PULP FICTION and SNAKES ON A PLANE (in which Koechner also co-starred, though I wouldn’t go so far as to call this moment “meta”).

Wayans and Atkins have an engaging comic chemistry and a few likable moments in the early going, before their space becomes invaded by the ghost, which has sex with both Kisha (who, predictably, really loves it) and Malcolm (who, predictably, really does not). But the fact that there’s no visible paranormal activity until about 25 minutes in points up the problem with A HAUNTED HOUSE. And even when tackling the occult, the filmmakers don’t make the most of the possibilities. To quote an old Gene Siskel review, A HAUNTED HOUSE may contain the screen’s first unfunny slapstick exorcism scene—and they’re almost always funny.

