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The Orphanage - DVD

Gripping horror Hollywood-free

by Neil Queen published on 18 July 2008

Since we first had the bejesus freaked out of us by *The Ring* (Ringu, if you want to be picky), there has been a slow and steady string of lo-fi chillers that have taken turns in weirding us out, wresting the power away from fairground Hollywood horrors in the process.

Asia led the way, thanks to directors like Hideo Nakata, Takashi Shimizu and the Pang brothers, but now the compass has swung to the west and Spain is the latest nascent industry to get the hairs on our neck up, thanks to films such as *Rec* and *The Orphanage*.

Like their Asian equivalents, *The Orphanage*, fronted by Pan's Labyrinth's Guillermo del Toro, rejects big-budget grotesque fantasy to focus on more intimate, domesticated fears, harking back to the ghost stories of centuries past in the process.

Laura, husband Carlos and son Simon move into a grand mansion, of great sentimental value to her, as it was the orphanage where she grew up, with the intention of adopting disabled kids, the terminally ill Simon himself being adopted.

As they settle in, things get unsettled, Simon's imaginary friend becoming imaginary friends. After playing a game with them, Simon stumbles upon the truth about himself and shortly after disappears at a house party - a mysterious and eerie-as-you-like hooded child obstructing Laura's attempts to find him and a mysterious old careworker the only lead.

Knowing he needs his medication to live, Laura and Carlos embark on a frantic, but fruitless search to find him. After resorting to a séance, Laura realises she must face the house's dark past to have any hope of getting her son back.

While the Asian horrors instilled fear in our



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everyday life, *The Orphanage* gets its potency from fiddling with our inescapably personal emotional fears - and it does so to incredible effect. Kids in horrors have their own currency, from *The Omen* to *The Shining*, but here, children are on the receiving end of the strife, and that adds a poignancy to the horror that is truly potent. Even the simple revelation of Simon's illness kicks like a mule. Maybe that's because I'm a parent, but in this era of Madeleine McCann and the Jersey foster home case, it's a universal fear.

That aside, *The Orphanage* is still a striking work. Recalling the rich, opulent design of *The Others* and the Korean *A Tale Of Two Sisters* lends an eternal, classic tone, while the script and acting give a depth and realism that makes the sparingly used shocks genuine heart-stopping moments.

The cast and sets are kept limiting, which also adds a claustrophobia to the events. It never tries to sugar the troubling theme and make it any more palatable, and stays true to its intention to both move and haunt you to the very end.

VERDICT

Tragic, yet tensely chilling, *The Orphanage* is a punchy shocker that is already on a par with its genre peers.

Rating: 15

Starring: Belen Rueda, Fernando Cayo, Roger Princep

Directed by: Juan Antonio Bayona

Extras: Q&A session, deleted scenes, director and Del Toro interview. Production and making-of featurettes

At a glance

What is it?

Gothic thriller horror

Good

Fresh continental meat that proves world cinema is more than a match for the Hollywood machine

Bad

The fact that the poor kid in it looks like a young Latka from the 70s comedy *Taxi*

Verdict

A tense, imaginative thriller that will have you gasping

Price 19.99 DVD/£24.99 Blu-ray

Our score

7/10

Your score

?/10