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A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET

Before its title card appears, director Samuel Bayer's reboot of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* open s -- as these things usually do -- with a dream sequence, in which a frightened, sleep-deprived teen finds himself face to face with the scarred and monstrous personage of Freddy Krueger. Granted, the murderous apparition with the razor-blade gloves and snappy sweater-and-hat combo, last seen in 2003's *Elm Street/Friday the 13th* mashup *Freddy Vs. Jason*, hasn't been away from cineplex screens for terribly long. But Freddy's arrival should still provide both a jolt and a kick, especially with the creepy, ferrety Jackie Earle Haley taking over the role from Robert Englund, whose initially horrifying figure in Wes Craven's low-rent classic descended into camp long before the series reached (what we incorrectly presumed was) its conclusion.

Yet when we get our first glimpse of Freddy in this new *Nightmare*, the effect -- especially if you have strong memories of this film's predecessors -- isn't scary or funny so much as ... odd. Cosmetically, and certainly wardrobe-wise, Haley's psychopath doesn't seem all that different from Englund's creation, and the actor provides the requisite throaty cackle and mad gleam in his eyes. But there's something wrong with the his face. Whereas Englund's Freddy was nothing if not expressive, his demented sneer routinely snapping into a Cheshire Cat grin, Haley's is lacquered, with his seared-flesh mug all but immobile; it looks like it's taking all of Haley's effort just to *smile*. (He may as well be wearing a Freddy Krueger Halloween mask.) The makeup is effective enough, I guess, and is perhaps more suggestive of an actual burn victim than the scars Englund sported. Yet for an *über*-villain as iconic as Freddy, it proves too limiting, and winds up being pretty representative of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* as a whole; like the makeup, the movie, too, is professionally designed, moderately impressive, and more than a bit stiff.

In some respects, Bayer's revamp is actually an improvement on its inspiration, boasting gorgeous, evocative photography and a complete absence of crummy performances, which is something that certainly can't be said about Craven's 1984 progenitor. (You're adorable, Heather Langenkamp, but still ... .) Bayer and screenwriters Wesley Strick and Eric Heisserer

also play shrewd tricks with the series' "Is this a dream or is it reality?" conceit by making the film's early dreamscapes so obviously imaginary that Freddy's appearances in later, "real-life" sequences are legitimately startling; I'd say there are about five or six good scares in the movie, which, excepting last fall's *Paranormal Activity*, is five or six more than most recent horror flicks have provided.

It turns out, though, that none of these improvements really matters all that much, because for all of its technical polish, and despite the cast's collective gift for looking concerned, petrified, and/or exhausted, this *Nightmare* is criminally lacking in personality. (It's also criminally lacking in humor, especially if you don't count Freddy's forced, T-shirt-ready quips, and I don't.) It's commendable that the filmmakers have steered away from the debilitating jokiness of the franchise's many sequels. But they've gone too far in the opposite direction; the whole endeavor is so one-dimensionally dour, with Freddy's how-I-became-a-maniac backstory so labored, that even performers as lively as Kyle Gallner, Connie Britton, and Clancy Brown can't rejuvenate it. By the movie's final reel, with the metallic scraping of Freddy's fingers given a too-liberal workout and the climactic battle that just won't freaking *end*, I realized that this remake wasn't disappointing (though it is) or unnecessary (though it *really* is) so much as just plain dull. In any *Nightmare on Elm Street*, you should be kept alert through your fear that characters will fall asleep, but in this one, I was more afraid that *I* might fall asleep.

FURRY VENGEANCE

You can have a reasonably good time at *Furry Vengeance* -- director Roger Kumble's family slapstick about forest-denizen retaliation against greedy land developers -- if your idea of a good time is trying to determine which point marks the absolute *lowest* point in Brendan Fraser's career. Arguments could easily be made for the sequence that finds

the actor getting sprayed, right in the face, by a pissed-off skunk, and attempting to eradicate the stench through a bath of tomato juice and Tabasco sauce. The scene in which Fraser is terrorized by a grizzly bear while trapped in a Porta-Potty certainly qualifies, as would the moment when he flies off his treadmill after it's unplugged by a devious raccoon, or when a particularly irksome encounter causes him to scream the dreaded profanity "
Miley Cyrus
!" (I'm guessing because "
Kelly Clarkson
!" was already used in
The 40-Year-Old Virgin
.) Personally, I'm going with the unpleasant sight of Fraser forced into wife Brooke Shields' hot-pink Lycra track suit -- which proved predictably, sadly unable to contain Fraser's tubby frame -- but there's actually something in this wildly unfunny, shockingly charmless comedy that's treated even more unfairly than Brendan Fraser: Brendan Fraser's junk. The man gets a sprinkler-hosing to the crotch, spills hot coffee in his lap, crushes his unmentionables on a rooftop; the only performer even unluckier than Fraser is ubiquitous comedian Ken Jeong, who finds a raccoon latching onto his privates with a blood-curdling "
Crunch
!" Aside from its brief, sharp turn by
The Daily Show
's Samantha Bee,
Furry Vengeance
is hatefully bad, and about the most wrongheaded and noxious entertainment devised for children that you could possibly imagine. Seriously, I think I've seen pornos less fixated on genitalia than
Furry Vengeance
. I'm reasonably sure one of them was
called Furry Venegance
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