



THE LAST EXORCISM

For the majority of its length, *The Last Exorcism* is a hell of a good time. I'd love to say that's because the movie is terrifying, but it isn't, really; the biggest jolt you're likely to experience comes in the first 20 minutes, when a teen unexpectedly hits a car's rear window with a rock. Yet until it goes seriously off the rails in its final third, director Daniel Stamm's low-tech scare flick is clever and engrossing (without being all that gross), and it boasts a protagonist who's something unique for his genre: a funny, friendly sort whom you're

still
aching to see get what's coming to him.

The character in question is Southern preacher and family man Cotton Marcus (Patrick Fabian), a self-described entertainer who, through melodramatic sermons and feats of sleight-of-hand, enjoys whipping his parishioners into fits of religious ecstasy. A healthy skeptic, Marcus has no illusions about his calling – “I used to want a TV ministry,” he says, “and now all I want is health insurance” – and reserves his greatest disdain for the practice of exorcism, which he forthrightly calls “a scam.” Designed and shot as a documentary in which Marcus will debunk the theory of demonic possession, *The Last Exorcism* follows the preacher as he visits the rural-Louisiana farm of Louis Sweetzer (Louis Herthum), whose cattle are being routinely slaughtered, and whose bright-eyed 16-year-old daughter, Nell (Ashley Bell), appears to be the killer; Sweetzer believes she's possessed, but Marcus knows better. Or
does
he?

From the outset, it's pretty clear what Stamm and screenwriters Huck Botko and Andrew Gurland are up to: The disbelieving Marcus will attempt to reveal the girl's “possession” as a sham, yet to his astonishment, will eventually be confronted with the notion that, yes, a demon *h*
as
taken residence inside her. That the film's arc is predictable, though, in no way lessens
The Last Exorcism

's initial appeal. Stamm is superb with spooky fringe touches that hint at grander horrors to come – the shot of a door closing on Nell, her lips curling into a suggestive smile, is perfectly timed to give you the heebie-jeebies – and he's frequently adept at pulling the wool over our eyes; during a preliminary exorcism ritual, an unseen beast roars and water boils when Nell's

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Written by Mike Schulz

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feet are momentarily submerged, and you're not quite sure whether these goings-on are Marcus' doing or Satan's. (Nell's brother, played with spectacular creepiness by Caleb Landry Jones, is nowhere near as conflicted.) For up to an hour, Stamm's offering is a refreshingly witty – and blessedly CGI-free – fright film, and it leads you to think it'll be that rare PG-13-rated genre piece that *doesn't* disappoint.

Sadly, it does, as the last half hour trashes the movie's early goodwill through distractingly labored dialogue, a goofy false ending, and a seriously goofy *real* ending; despite its many virtues – and based on the groans heard at the screening I attended – it's hard to imagine many viewers leaving *The Last Exorcism* feeling satisfied. (The film doesn't even fulfill the promise of its setup. Once Marcus gleans that supernatural forces may indeed be at work, we're denied a single moment of shock on his part; this man who believes possession to be an utter hoax accepts the truth of it without batting an eyelid.) Yet much of it *is* satisfying, and nothing so much as the smart, genial performance by Patrick Fabian, who manages to be effortlessly charming and inventive while still creating a figure whose hubris goads you, every once in a while, into rooting for the devil. Fabian is like a Matthew McConaughey that you *don't* want to smack, and despite my natural aversion to such things, if he ever winds up paired with Kate Hudson in a dippy romantic comedy, I'll attend with little complaint.



GET LOW

In the pleasant, touching, yet dramatically slight *Get Low*, Robert Duvall plays a 1930s Tennessee hermit who arranges his own funeral (with himself as host), and Sissy Spacek plays his old flame, and while both are typically excellent, part of the ennui you might feel comes from sensing that you've watched these actors in these roles too many times already. Duvall, hiding a broken heart, is cantankerous and ornery, and Spacek exudes beatific warmth, and there's

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nothing much to do but wait as their delicate reunion is followed by an inevitable fight followed by an inevitable, tearful reconciliation;

Get Low

touches on themes of oppressive guilt and absolution, yet like Duvall's and Spacek's heartfelt work here, little about director Aaron Schneider's film contains a whiff of surprise. Still, it's awfully sincere, boasting impressive period details and lovely portrayals by Lucas Black and the great Bill Cobbs, and Bill Murray, as a sardonic funeral director, earns grateful,

appropriate

laughs for damned near everything he says.

Get Low

is like numerous movies you've seen. Miraculously, the brilliantly deadpan Murray – even after 30-plus years on-screen – is still absolutely unlike anyone else.



TAKERS

In one of the more memorable and enjoyable bits in the action spoof *The Other Guys*, a nearby explosion knocks Will Ferrell and Mark Wahlberg to the ground; yowling in pain, Ferrell demands to know how characters in movies always manage to casually walk away from those things without interruption or severe hearing loss. Director John Luessenhop's heist thriller

Takers

pretty much

starts

with that scene - its well-dressed, too-cool-for-school hoods even saunter away from the fiery outburst in slow motion, as in a bigger-budget

Reservoir Dogs

- but the film isn't quite as ridiculous as you're led to expect. There's certainly a lot that's wrong with

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Takers

: its ready embrace of every cop-flick cliché under the sun; its climactic reels, which run a good 20 minutes longer than necessary; its employment of the eternally smug and underwhelming Hayden Christensen as a tattooed smoothie with a porkpie hat. Yet the movie kind of works. It's directed with verve and drive, and although the sequence is wildly illogical, there's a six-minute foot chase late in the film - featuring Chris Brown leapfrogging through traffic and zipping through an L.A. hotel - that could stand toe-to-toe with the best of Bond. Plus, while such actors as Steve Harris, Zoe Saldana, and Paul Walker are given pitifully little to do (which, as far as Walker is concerned, is admittedly no great loss), there are sharp, focused tough-guy turns by Matt Dillon, Michael Ealy, and the rapper T.I., and in a few brief scenes, Idris Elba and Marianne Jean-Baptiste take

Takers

to another realm entirely. Playing the film's suave master thief and his crack-addicted sister, these extraordinarily gifted British performers lend both earthiness and class to the proceedings. I was thrilled that they were around, and I can only hope their next collaboration is a little less John Luessenhop and a lot more Mike Leigh.