

Written by Mike Schulz
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PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 3

Let's cut right to it, because in the end, whatever complaints I have about the movie are irrelevant: *Paranormal Activity 3* scared me silly.

Especially after last year's underwhelming second entry, I concede that the novelty of the series' premise – in which demonic terrors are witnessed solely through home-video footage – has significantly waned since 2009's first *Paranormal Activity*. (Although, to be fair, a modern scare flick in which not a single droplet of blood is spilled will always be at least *somewhat*

novel.) I'll also admit that

PA3

is replete with mostly awkward performances and weak dialogue, and characters doing the kinds of dumb-ass things that make certain audiences irrationally hostile, and annoyingly *talkative*

, at films of this ilk. ("Why is that guy still videotaping everything?" "Why is that couple still leaving their kids unattended?" "Why don't these people just

move

already?!?") Plus, while it was a shrewd and promising decision to set this prequel in the late 1980s – when the original film's haunted Katie Featherston and her screen sister were little girls – the comedic (and comically horrific) possibilities behind the on-screen VHS recordings are barely explored. Couldn't we have been given one scene in which we're viewing some monstrous spectral occurrence yet aren't allowed to see its climax, because the tape reached the end of its six-hour capacity?

But enough griping; when directors Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman (of last year's "Is it a doc or not?" *cause célèbre* *Catfish*) are really on their game here, which is the majority of the time, you watch

Paranormal Activity 3 with a gut-clenching avidity. Joost and Schulman aren't above simplistic – and arguably cheap – “

Boo!

” effects, and they score a couple of strong jolts here with the unexpected appearances of a mask-wearing practical joker and the younger of the movie's two daughters (Jessica Tyler Brown), whose imaginary friend Toby may be the source of the

PA3

house's haunting. (Brown, who doesn't appear to be a day over four, also offers the film's

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freshest, most believable portrayal.) The directors, however, are even more effective when sustaining their scares past what would seem to be their breaking points, particularly in their employment of what proves to be a spectacularly unsettling, queasily enjoyable gimmick.

After setting up motionless surveillance cameras in two of his house's bedrooms, and witnessing minor instances of spectral oddness, *PA3* lead Christopher Nicholas Smith gets creative, and straps a video camera to a gently oscillating fan in his family's living room. For this gesture, I wanted to both applaud him and kill him (and screenwriter Christopher B. Landon, too), because the tension that builds during these

slo-o-owly

rotating shots is damned near unendurable. I don't want to spoil the innard-knotting fun for those who haven't yet seen the film; but suffice it to say that Joost and Schulman play such wicked games with their compositions and timing here – particularly in the surprise arrival(s) of a blandly nightmarish, sheet-covered figure – that

Paranormal Activity 3

, in these scenes,

becomes that most utterly welcome of scare movies: one in which you really,

really

don't want to see what's about to occur, yet are wholly unable to look away.



THE THREE MUSKETEERS

In the spirit of director Paul W.S. Anderson's high-octane, blockbuster-minded adaptation of *The Three Musketeers*

, I think it's fair to say that Alexandre Dumas isn't rolling in his grave so much as leaping, diving, and hurtling – probably, for a goodly portion of these activities, in slow motion. I suppose that after the financial success of Guy Ritchie's

Sherlock Holmes

, it was inevitable that Dumas' swashbuckling classic would be treated to an ultra-loud, crassly overscaled, structurally incoherent Hollywood rebooting. But what in God's name did the French author (or, for that matter, audiences) do to deserve a presentation this mind-numbingly terrible? For 110 interminable minutes, bored-looking actors (among them Matthew Macfadyen, Ray Stevenson, Orlando Bloom, and Christoph Waltz) exude utter cheerlessness, flatly stoic

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dialogue meshes with anachronistically inane dialogue ("Your outfit is very retro"), Milla Jovovich does her one-note Milla Jovovich thing, and the whole of this gaudily outfitted experience would be unbearable if you weren't so busy giggling at the staggering performance ineptitude of its D'Artagnan, played by a callow block of wood named Logan Lerman. (This twerp makes Zac Efron look like Ryan freakin' Gosling.)

The Three Musketeers

' final image sends you off with the unmistakable threat of sequels. Anyone else up for co-signing a writ of injunction on Dumas' behalf?



JOHNNY ENGLISH REBORN

As I have a pretty low tolerance for pop-eyed buffoonery, I generally find 10 minutes' worth of Rowan Atkinson shtick about seven minutes too much. But color me shocked: Director Oliver Parker's *Johnny English Reborn*, in which the comedian reprises his blithely clueless, slapstick-007 character, made me laugh a lot. To be sure, this spy spoof is a messy, hit-and-miss grab bag of an entertainment, and I wished that co-stars Gillian Anderson and Rosamund Pike were given more, or at least funnier, things to do. But the film is genial and quick-moving and gloriously unpretentious, and during some of Atkinson's goofier routines – racing through the streets in a souped-up wheelchair, hopping about in a body bag – you may find yourself chuckling with an almost childlike lack of restraint. (The little kids at my screening appeared to have a ball at this thing.) From its endearingly crackpot opening in Tibet to Atkinson's drug-induced gymnastics at the climax,

Johnny

English Reborn

is a terrific time, and I'm happy to report that the film's verbal gags frequently rival its physical ones. It's borderline impossible, after all, not to fall for a movie that finds its British lead looking to the heavens and begging, "Dear God, let me not die at the hands of the

Swiss

.”

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