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PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 4

Pity those who walk into *Paranormal Activity 4* having no familiarity with this popular horror series' previous entries. You should really pity the rest of us, too, but first things first.

After interrupting the chronology with last year's prequel *Paranormal Activity 3*, which was set in the late 1980s, directors Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman open their latest with home-movie footage from 2006, and a reprise of the toddler Hunter's abduction by

PA1

star Katie Featherston at the end of

PA2

. (Got all that?) We then jump five years, with a new family of unlucky suburbanites – among them a six-year-old boy – contending with the same supernatural phenomena that plagued their franchise forebears: eerie noises, strangely mobile furniture, and a threatening, invisible presence with a fondness for 3 a.m. wake-up calls. They're also contending with frequent, unanticipated visits by a creepy little boy named Robbie, also about six, who just moved in across the street, and whose single mother never seems to be at home. Could it be-e-e ... Katie?!

For fans of this mock-doc serial – and despite my dissatisfaction with *PA2*, I consider myself one – this setup should be foolproof. Shot, like its predecessors, as a faux documentary with every image purportedly taken from a video recorder, surveillance tape, laptop, or smart phone,

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Written by Mike Schulz

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PA4

gives us the presentation we expect and have enjoyed in the past, and gooses us with its questions of "Whatever happened to Hunter?" and "Is darling little Robbie a psychopath?" I'd imagine that

PA

newbies, however, might be hopelessly confused, and even actively irritated, by elements here that we series veterans have simply come to accept. What's with the random, nearly throwaway references to a coven of witches and some character named Toby? What's with the characters' obsessive need to record their every waking and sleeping moment? What's with that maddening non-ending of an ending? And why is the acting so poor and the dialogue seemingly one long variant on "What the f--- was

that

?!"

I'm unhappy to report, though, that this franchise admirer was just as bothered by Joost's and Schulman's latest outing, mainly because the movie seemed like it was just spinning its wheels; there's not enough that's fresh here to make this follow-up feel at all necessary, and its too-few scares feel completely derivative. (The movie really could've used a stylistic innovation such as the slowly rotating fan from *PA3*; the employment of Skype, it turns out, is a weak substitute.)

To be fair, we are treated to some cleverly low-rent effects, particularly those involving an unfathomably ambulatory kitchen knife. But even at fewer than 90 minutes, the film feels overlong for its meager payoffs, and there are so damned many recording devices now being employed for the narrative – a camera seems positioned in every last room in the house – that

PA4

winds up looking like a deathly static, no-budget version of every supernatural scare flick you've ever seen. It will come as absolutely no shock that the climax conveniently sets us up for

Paranormal Activity 5

, yet that's actually fitting. Since it's lacking from the beginning, why bother introducing shock at the end?



ALEX CROSS

In the action-thriller *Alex Cross*, Tyler Perry assumes the role of the police psychologist

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portrayed by Morgan Freeman in
a Spider

Kiss the Girls and Along Came

which is kind of like trading in a Lexus for a Gosh, I dunno. A Pacer? A cardboard box with wheels attached? When playing Madea, Perry routinely delivers personality, fire, and crack comic timing. Yet while, when

out

of drag, Perry is a genial-enough screen presence, he's also mostly dull and hopelessly lacking in nuance, and nuance is about the only thing that could've saved director Rob Cohen's rote, clichéd, weakly staged adaptation of James Patterson's novel

Cross.

Some welcome professionalism is provided by Jean Reno and the silky-smooth Giancarlo Esposito, and Matthew Fox's outrageous, pop-eyed overacting as a serial killer provides a few (unintentional?) giggles.

In general, though,

Alex Cross

is the sort of generically lousy cop movie in which the dependably unpleasant Edward Burns – who must have

dozens

of generically lousy cop movies on his résumé – inevitably pops up as a sarcastic Irish-American detective. If he didn't, you'd spend the whole movie wondering

why

he didn't.



MEERKATS 3D

I entered *Meerkats 3D* – the 40-minute National Geographic documentary currently being screened at the Putnam Museum – expecting cute. I mean, come on ... : furry little creatures who stand on their hind legs and, in my head at least, talk like Nathan Lane? But not having previously seen TV's nature series

Meerkat Manor (created by this

film's director, Caroline Hawkins), here's what I didn't expect: These things are mean as
hell

. Warring meerkat tribes? Violent dissections of millipedes? Attacks on a king cobra? A meerkat matriarch banishing her pregnant daughter and forcing the poor creature to miscarry – as opposed, narrator Emily Watson informs us, to the more traditional Mama Meerkat habit of killing her grandchildren herself? You'll get your share of cute from this beautifully filmed,

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terrifically informative edu-tainment, but who would've guessed that, with

Meerkats 3D,

we'd also get freakin'

Shakespeare

?

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