

'The Exorcist: Believer' fails to get the blood pumping

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««

out of «««««

Running Time: 111 minutes

This feature from Universal Pictures opened in cinemas on Friday, Oct. 6.

It's been some 50 years since *The Exorcist* arrived on movie screens. Based on the 1971 novel by William Peter Blatty, the feature caused an enormous stir upon its release. Everyone seemed compelled to watch this grandiose tale, which soon became the highest grossing film of all time for Warner Bros. If that wasn't enough, the film was nominated for nine Academy Awards, ultimately winning for Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Sound.

In the following decades, elaborate follow-ups of varying quality have appeared, in addition to dozens upon dozens of copycats. *The Exorcist: Believer* is an official sequel with a direct connection to the original film. But sadly, the end result feels closer in execution to one of those derided knock-offs.

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The central plot follows Georgia-based photographer and single parent Victor Fielding (Leslie Odom Jr.) raising his 12-year-old daughter Angela (Lidya Jewett). While the two are happy, both feel a lingering sadness over a tragic past event.

One day, Angela decides to sneak away with friend Katherine (Olivia O’Neill) and head into the woods. The kids disappear for multiple days, causing grave concern and panic. They are both eventually found but begin exhibiting bizarre and violent behavior.

Victor rebuffs suggestions about demonic possession from a religious neighbor and nurse (Ann Dowd). But after physicians fail to come to a diagnosis and suggest placing Angela in a psychiatric institute, Victor starts listening. He eventually asks for assistance from Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn), a mother who has written about her experiences involving possession.

The cast are fine, with Odom Jr. trying to eke drama out of his character’s tragic past. And Jewett is a charismatic co-lead as a youngster with a bright smile who suddenly turns into a monstrous threat.

Yet the screenplay has numerous issues. For one, the scale here is much smaller than in previous chapters. The original jumps from Iraq to Washington, DC, while the sequels have boasted settings like Kenya, Egypt and New York City. Some of the settings and images are striking, and occasionally, even iconic. Good or bad, they are all epic horror films. There is a brief opening sequence that takes place in Haiti that shows promise for taking the story in a different direction, but the bulk is set entirely within a residential neighborhood.

While it’s fine to take a smaller approach and focus on character, many of the supporting figures, including Katherine’s family, are written very broadly. They don’t feel particularly convincing in their handling of the highly unusual situation being depicted. The tale also relies on jump scares. One or two come close to startling, but the majority miss the mark entirely.

The movie also delivers a lot of contradictory dialogue and exposition. We hear from characters that exorcisms are common across the world in many religions, but initially Victor can find almost no one to assist him when push comes to shove. Demons in this picture are portrayed as incredibly dangerous supernatural forces that can literally turn people into pretzels and do terminal harm. But the screenplay also suggests that literally any average person can be a

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successful exorcist if their intent is pure.

The film also makes a mess of its big returning cast member, Ellen Burstyn. When Victor seeks help from Chris MacNeil about how to deal with his possessed daughter, her advice and behavior also ends up sounding contradictory. And the drama involving the elderly woman's strained familial relationships seems tacked on in an attempt at fan service. The resolution doesn't make a big emotional sting.

Besides a reference or two to Haitian customs, the only other unique aspect to the story is the double-exorcism climax. But even this sequence is an overbaked, CGI-heavy event that features little in the way of an epic showdown between good and evil that one might hope for. *The Exorcist: Believer* is said to be the first chapter in a new three-picture sequel series, but this schlocky effort fails to get the blood pumping or leave one excited about the next chapter.

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