

‘The Witch’ – A weird flick that may cast an eerie spell on you

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
Friday, 19 February 2016 03:35



Rating: ««« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 93 min.

Advertised as a “New England folktale”, *The Witch* may fall under the category of horror, but don’t go in expecting typical jump scares and traditional devices. The latest creeper to arrive in cinemas is far more arthouse film than slasher movie in its approach. First time director Robert Eggers uses a style not dissimilar to the work of independent filmmakers like Ben Wheatley (*Kill List*

,
A Field in England

). But is this attempt to terrify successful?

Set in the 17th Century, a Puritan family is exiled from their plantation and travel deep into the woods to start a new life. When a newborn child disappears under suspicious circumstances, it sets off a chain of events that spiral downward for the husband (Ralph Ineson), wife (Kate Dickie), teenage daughter (Anya Taylor-Joy) and three younger children (Harvey Scrimshaw, Ellie Grainger, Lucas Dawson).

Interestingly, the filmmakers claim to have used diaries and written records of real events to help fashion the story and dialogue; they suggest that some of the lines are used verbatim. It’s an enterprising technique that effectively recreates the era and what it must have felt like to be there, but also adds some authenticity to the increasingly supernatural proceedings (although this is a horror picture and there is a great deal of exaggeration).

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One can't be too terrified by the sight of a suspicious looking goat or hare, but there are some distressing and festering images as the characters begin to act out in various ways. This includes some upsetting implied violence to children and a particularly disturbing moment late in the story that involves a black crow. Still, in truth the most anxiety-provoking material is the family conflict.

The initial tragedy is unsettling. Yet instead of coming together, this family quickly splinters apart. In fact, the little lies and secrets held by various members appear to greatly hasten their dissolution. The majority of those within this Puritan family are flawed in various ways. Hubris seems to be a failing of the father and the mother is quick to heap blame on one of her children. As events slowly dissolve, many are accused of being witches and the accused attempt to cast aspersions on others in order to save themselves.

All the characters are hiding information from others and playing fast and loose with their deeply held beliefs. There are supernatural elements at play, but one gets the impression that this faulty brood could have torn each other apart with less threatening invaders. The small cast are all up to the task, effectively conveying fear and paranoia as events progress. And the photography is appropriately dark, dreary and grey, yet the images (particularly in the shadows of night) are captured in a uniquely compelling manner. It all lends to a mood of isolation and consistent dread.

This is an odd, low-key and interpretive effort that will confound as many as it will spook. Admittedly, I could have done without the more obvious Devil and Witch supernatural horrors and may have preferred having the strange events left open to interpretation on the part of the viewer. Still, it's all well handled by the filmmakers and this isn't a flaw so much as a personal preference.

In addition to the compelling family subtext, the movie is consistently tense, well-acted and at times marvelously photographed using minimal light sources. *The Witch* is definitely a very acquired taste, but if you approach it very differently than your average fright flick, it may end up casting a bit of a spell on you.

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