

'Immaculate' is far from pristine

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

out of <<<<<<

Running Time: 89 minutes

This motion picture from Neon is currently playing in cinemas.

It's Easter, which for some means fun bunny-related activities and/or religious celebrations. But there's definitely counter-programming available for those who are interested. *Immaculate* is a tale set in Italy involving a nefarious plot occurring at a church.

Sister Cecilia (Sydney Sweeney) is a devout Catholic nun sad to see her local parish closing. She decides to move from America to Italy and take a position at a remote convent. The lead is greeted by figures like Father Sal Tedeschi (Álvaro Morte), Mother Superior (Dora Romano) and Sister Isabelle (Giulia Heathfield Di Renzi) who explain her role at the facility. It seems Cecilia is to help take care of aged nuns with terminal illnesses. The protagonist makes friends with another recent arrival, Sister Gwen (Benedetta Porcaroli), but generally finds herself struggling with the difficult personalities at the church.

Things get stranger when she begins seeing disturbing figures in red mesh masks and experiences distressing nightmares. Cecilia becomes even more concerned after being informed that she is pregnant, despite being celibate.

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There are some good elements in the film. The photography is impressive, featuring plenty of moody convent interiors lit in candlelight. A very tense section of the film takes place in the darkened catacombs beneath the church. It is all shot in limited light and is creepy.

The cast are also good and do what they can to lend some gravitas to a solemnly delivered but silly story. Sweeney makes a positive impression as Cecilia. The character certainly changes over the course of events from an innocent and naïve follower to an aggressive and determined figure ready to take charge and be in control of her own fate.

However, just because a picture is well-intended and features good performances doesn't mean that it comes together effectively. There's an early exchange between Cecilia and a notable character who overshares their personal history. The moment they make a comment about their previous life, most will have a rough idea of what has been occurring, draining much of the suspense. A great deal is also made of threatening religious figures wearing red. Cecilia even witnesses them commit a horrific act against a character (which seems like a gross overreaction on their part, given the individual's lack of knowledge about the conspiracy). Yet despite these figures being set up as a horrifying threat, they don't play much of a part in the finale.

It isn't until Cecilia goes into labor that she decides to fight back, leading to some exaggerated physical alterations with a couple of the villains. They're not badly shot or put together, but at times definitely strain credibility. And while a couple of the jump scares work reasonably well (including one that features a character getting grasped from an unexpected location), many others fall flat.

Horror enthusiasts will see little pieces and visual references cobbled together from genre movies new and old, including *Rosemary's Baby*, *Midsommar* and others. Even the effective jump scare mentioned above feels like a homage to a jolt from a 1980s George Romero movie. When so many plot elements as stylistic choices feel borrowed, it all can't help but feel hackneyed. And even after something original is introduced (including the lead being briefly treated like the Virgin Mary), it isn't delved into with enough depth.

Instead, this movie follows a predictable path. *Immaculate* is better than several other titles of its ilk, but is still far from pristine. The plot doesn't hold up to scrutiny and the end product will instead make fear fans want to spend the holiday revisiting the films that this picture takes its

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inspiration from.

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