

Movie Review: 'The Orphanage'

by David_Elliott

You need to be devout about generic chills to really go for "The Orphanage." Spanish director J.A. Bayona, up from shorts and videos, has devotion - but what is the Spanish phrase for "everything but the kitchen sink?"

'THE ORPHANAGE' - Lots of creepy creatures show up in the suspense thriller 'The Orphanage.' CNS Photo courtesy of Picturehouse. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Loading it gothically with him is writer Sergio Sanchez, who has said he wrote to mimic films he loved as a boy: "Poltergeist," "The Omen," "Rosemary's Baby." The result is hooked on kids' imaginations, and on the worn devices of old movies.

It starts with a childhood game and ends with one from the dark side. Darkness made quite visible is the grand old orphanage near the sea, from which Laura was adopted at 7. She returns at 37 to its abandoned

vastness as the new owner.

Belen Rueda plays adult Laura, seemingly not hexed by memories of the place, which might be called Xanadu, Manderley or the Castle of Otranto. Why are so many people in fear films such masochists?

Her doctor husband keeps smiling blandly for the longest time, even after their dreamy, adopted son, Simon (Roger Princep), slips off with imaginary friends to a huge sea cave under a lighthouse cliff. And weird Montserrat Carulla shows up as a "social worker" with haunted eyes, to reveal that the boy has a serious illness.

Clearly there are ghosts in all the eerie halls and crannies, and that the cave is a haunted theme park all by itself. Once Simon disappears, it's up to Laura to reach across the twilight zone to find the boy. She becomes a Stella Dallas of the supernatural, maternally compulsive, bringing in psychic experts with scanning machines, even gaunt Geraldine Chaplin as a medium who seems jumpy about her own shadow.

Sanchez and Bayona pack the full kit: creaky sounds, shattered glass, night vapors, haunting dolls, bones, crypt-like rooms, Catholic symbols, hide-and-seek, a gory death, a deformed lad living in virtual hell. A "welcoming" party for afflicted children echoes the staged fantasy photos of Ralph Eugene Meatyard but, strangely, the Blair Witch never appears.

This picture is "presented by Guillermo Del Toro," and has some of the dense, crepe-hung atmosphere of his classy creepers "Cronos" and "Pan's Labyrinth." But Bayona seems, though utterly committed, more a calculator than creator, and his rote inventory sadly includes Rueda's fervent, stressed but bathetic performance.

The truly disturbing element is the heavy reliance on childhood loneliness, fear and sickness. This mood-swamped contraption presses along almost interminably, until - but why spoil it? Suffer if you must.

A Picturehouse release in Spanish (subtitled). Director: J.A. Bayona. Writer: Sergio C. Sanchez. Cast: Belen Rueda, Roger Princep, Fernando Cayo, Geraldine Chaplin, Montserrat Carulla. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes. Rated R. 2 stars.

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