

Movie Review: 'The Reaping'

by *David_Elliott*

Hell must be made of gumbo, moss, mud and blood. At least, that's the recipe you might derive from "The Reaping," which cooks the old hocus-pocus into bogus hokum.

'THE REAPING' - Idris Elba and Hilary Swank star in the suspense movie 'The Reaping.' CNS Photo courtesy of Gene Page.

Katherine (Hilary Swank) is a former minister - faith and family lost in disastrous Sudan - who has become a sort of secular exorcist at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. She exposes miracles as moonshine. But her big test is bayou country, a place now unhappily visited by the 10 biblical plagues of ancient Egypt (shouldn't Katrina count as the first?).

She goes down with loyal Ben (Idris Elba), meets hunky local squire Doug (David Morrissey), encounters Loren (AnnaSophia Robb), a vaguely supernatural teen whose brother is dead and mother is nuts. "Religious" hicks hex the girl as pure evil, as scheduled plagues arrive (frogs rain down, and the bayou turns to blood, symbolically and unfortunately related to the girl's first menstrual cycle).

As locusts hit town, scientific Katherine starts getting her faith back. That is, she gets really scared. By then, the floating fish and bloated cattle, and the brother who looks like Satan's beef jerky after a nasty chew, have made this the stunted, drive-in spawn of "The Exorcist" and "Deliverance."

Director Stephen Hopkins gets a point or two for Dixie-goth ambience. And Stephen Rea has a real crying game as Father Costigan, his faith so assaulted by diabolic mischief that he is virtually the plague whisperer. Hell hath no fury like a Satan offended, and poor Costigan needs no Da Vinci Code to feel the wrath.

Part of this very plagued movie's problem is that the wildly fertile new digital effects are becoming, by sheer and proficient volume, less effective. In olden days, we might look at the new ick or ugly and say, "Wow, that's creepy." Now, we just think, "Gee, nice effects."

The deeper problem, of course - the sort that can flatten even a vividly upright, credible talent like Swank - is the old "Exorcist" fallacy. The film can only imagine religion as a proposal of blind faith, a faith so pathetically blind that the only compelling "evidence" for it are the grisly works of Beelzebub (God becomes a sequel).

If you truly believe that way, you've already proven that hell exists as a lousy trick of the mind. The film has crosses, but the spirit of Christ is scarcely ever evident, except in Katherine's decent feeling for the girl.

And darn if Satan doesn't get to exploit even that, with a twist true to the corniest "gotcha" tradition of junk horror. There are times when movies feed on their pulp tradition so ravenously that nothing is left but the guilty promise of more dung to come.

RATINGS4 STARS - Excellent.3 STARS - Worthy.2 STARS - Mixed.1 STAR - Poor.0 - Forget It (a dog) A Warner Bros. release. Director: Stephen Hopkins. Writers: Carey Hayes, Chad Hayes, Brian Rousso. Cast: Hilary Swank, David Morrissey, Idris Elba, AnnaSophia Robb, Stephen Rea. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. Rated R. 1 star.

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