

Blu-Ray Review: 'Cirque du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant' Totally Sucks

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CHICAGO – It's now official: the Weitz brothers have proven that they are the wrong people to make vampire movies. While Chris got tangled in the turgid melodrama of "Twilight: New Moon," Paul tried to inject irreverent humor into the first installment of another gloomy franchise, based on Darren O'Shaughnessy's book series detailing the adventures of adolescent vampire Darren Shan.

It's obvious why vampires appeal to a young fan base. They embody the hormonal Id waiting to erupt within teenage souls, encapsulated by Bella's yearning to be "bitten" (Edward might as well be wearing an abstinence ring). Yet while "Twilight" is an obvious metaphor for sexual repression, "Cirque du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant" seems to be a metaphor for teen suicide. The two main characters, high schools buds Darren (Chris Massoglia) and Steve (Josh Hutcherson), are so fed up with life that they'd rather join a blood-sucking cult than finish their homework. Even Harry Potter had to worry about exams!



Blu-Ray Rating: **1.5/5.0**

The film opens with Darren playing video games in his freshly buried coffin while his family mourns outside. This makes Darren unlikable right off the bat, though it doesn't help that Massoglia is one of the worst actors ever to acquire a lead role in a Hollywood picture. He reminded me of the introverted kids in high school who couldn't raise their voices above the level of a mumbled monotone while reading aloud in class. His dead-eyed, gape-mouthed expression never changes, while the immensely over-qualified ensemble is forced to act around him. Hutcherson is a better actor (he single-handedly broke hearts in "Bridge to Terabithia"), but he's all wrong for the role of a vengeful bad boy who spouts, "I will hunt you down!" Darren and Steve are destined to become arch-nemeses after they stumble upon a traveling sideshow featuring legendary vamp Larten Crepsley (John C. Reilly). Steve's dreams of becoming a vampire are foiled by Crepsley, who favors Darren's blood.



(L to R) Crepsley (John C. Reilly) makes a curious proposal to Darren (Chris Massoglia) in *Cirque Du Freak: The Vampires Assistant*.

Photo credit: David Lee

One of the story's silly conceits is its diving line between "good" and "bad" vampires. Crepsley never intends on killing his victims ("You just sedate them, feed a little bit, and then leave"), unlike the evil Vampaneze, who are joined by Steve after he's confronted by the mysterious Mr. Tiny (Michael Cerveris), who creepily purrs, "I love your DNA." The climactic showdown between Darren and Steve is needlessly delayed, since the franchise needs a reason to lumber from one pointless chapter to the next. The script, written by Weitz and Brian Helgeland ("Mystic River"), never finds a way to balance the grim subject matter with deadpan humor, thus making it difficult for viewers to take anything seriously. Lots of effort was put into visualizing the freaks who populate the sideshow, many of whom are played by A-list celebrities who must've signed on to the project while shouting, "I'm going to Hogwarts!" Sadly, Darren Shan is no more memorable a character than Eragon or Percy Jackson.



"Cirque du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), and accompanied by English, Spanish and French audio tracks, as well as a DVS track for the visually impaired. The BD-Live-enabled disc includes a pocket BLU app for iPhone and iPod Touch, U-Control picture-in-picture features, a D-Box Metadata track and a social BLU app that allows viewers to share film-related content through Facebook and Twitter.

There's nearly a half-hour of brief deleted scenes that hint at a more overtly comic approach to the material. The funniest footage centers on Patrick Fugit's frustrated musician (with the assigned freak identity of "Snake Boy"), who's easily the most entertaining character in the film. Hutcherson's wretched family life is glimpsed at, along with some discarded visual ideas (the most perplexing being two seductive freaks connected like puzzle pieces). In the three-part, 20-minute making-of featurette, Reilly praises Massoglia for his "emotional honesty," while Weitz says he didn't want an over-actor for the lead role (for the sequel, he should replace Massoglia with a pale, gape-mouthed department store mannequin). An 18-minute tour through the Cirque campgrounds is reminiscent of Hogwarts tours in the early "Harry Potter" DVDs, yet it doesn't allow viewers to navigate the landscape themselves. It also lacks the chief ingredient that distinguishes "Potter" from all the other wannabe franchises: a true sense of magic.

'Cirque du Freak: The Vampire's Assistant' is released by Universal Home Entertainment and stars Chris Massoglia, John C. Reilly, Josh Hutcherson, Michael Cerveris, Jessica Carlson, Patrick Fugit, Ken Wantanabe, Salma Hayek, Orlando Jones, Jane Krakowski, Frankie Faizon and Willem Dafoe. It was written by Paul Weitz and Brian Helgeland and directed by Paul Weitz. It was released on February 23rd, 2010. It is rated PG-13.



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