

Ineffective ‘Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark’ From Producer Guillermo Del Toro

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on August 26, 2011 - 9:03am

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Echoing elements of masterful works by Producer Guillermo Del Toro (most notably “The Devil’s Backbone,” “Pan’s Labyrinth”), “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark” is an incredibly frustrating remake, a film that reminds one of scary movies instead of actually producing scares itself. There are gothic elements that work, but the story simply isn’t strong enough to support a remake and lackluster direction fails to iron out the flaws in this potential horror hit.

Most haunted house films suffer from a common flaw – why the Hell won’t they just leave the house? “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark” may be the most egregious offender of this regular problem ever. The film is constantly shattering suspension of disbelief, which prevents it from ever becoming honestly scary. When everyone in the audience would merely turn and run from the fictional situation at hand, it stops the fictional fear cold. “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark” is a story about a child being tormented by violent creatures. After increasingly terrifying attacks, the idea that she would spend another minute (much less actually SLEEP) in the house where these creatures live is just too much to take. “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark” is illogical on every level and that lack of logic also leads to a lack of honest scares.



Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark
Photo credit: Miramax Films

Much like “Pan’s,” “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark” is another tale of a young girl arriving at a history-filled estate with a stepparent to add to the drama inherent in something new. The best elements of Del Toro and Matthew Robbins’ screenplay play off classic fairy tale elements – the creatures under the bed, the evil stepmother, the haunted house. These elements are woven around the story of a smart, precocious girl

(Bailee Madison), her often-preoccupied father (Guy Pearce), and her new stepmother (Katie Holmes). The trio moves into an old estate with the intention of renovating it for the cover of *Architectural Digest*.

Of course, it's not long before our heroine is exploring the previously-sealed basement and hearing the whispering voices of something asking her to come and play. Rather than run fleeing, the lonely girl investigates and sets free dozens of ugly little beasts who proceed to terrorize her. Del Toro and Robbins develop a somewhat-nifty mythology around these creatures (that stepmom has to leave the house to learn at the most inopportune time) as they are part Tooth Fairy, part Gremlin, and part demon. They want your children's teeth but they can't come into the light. A Polaroid camera serves as a nifty weapon in the final act.

Sorta. Debut director Troy Nixey doesn't have the eye for a challenging piece like "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark." When the Polaroid is introduced, savvy viewers naturally assume that it will lead to at least one strong visual – a creature of the darkness caught in the flash of the bulb. It does happen on a plot level but isn't accompanied by a scary, memorable visual. In fact, the piece is almost entirely devoid of memorable visuals save for perhaps a few shadows rising up shower curtains in a scene so traumatic that the fact that the rest of the film doesn't consist of the poor terrorized girl merely screaming and crying is purely ridiculous. Horror needs to work as visual storytelling and "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark" isn't visually memorable.



Don't Be Afraid of the Dark

Photo credit: Miramax Films

And it isn't thematically intriguing either. To be blunt, I was never invested in these characters to the point where I was overly concerned what happened to them. Their behavior feels so scripted at every turn that they are nothing more than devices – they are as real as the creatures who crawl from the Earth to steal their teeth.

To be fair, Pearce and Holmes find some nice moments – typically the ones away from the horror arc of the film. The story of a younger stepmother trying to get closer to her hesitant stepdaughter is actually more interesting than the horror one. When mom's dress is found in tatters (one assumes the creatures were bored waiting for their prey to go to bed and needed something to do), the ensuing scenes of domestic turmoil are far more interesting than the action of the piece. Pearce is one of our best working actors and Holmes has long been underrated. One hopes she finds a part to prove that again soon.

Ultimately, "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark" is far from a disaster. Del Toro is too talented a filmmaker even when he's not directing to let the work fall completely on its face. And, oddly, it feels like a love letter to the original, a widely-berated TV movie that Del Toro has claimed helped spawn his love for horror. The remake is unlikely to do the same for future generations of filmmakers.

"Don't Be Afraid of the Dark" stars Bailee Madison, Katie Holmes, and Guy Pearce. It was written by Guillermo Del Toro and Matthew Robbins and directed by Troy Nixey. It opens nationwide on August 26th, 2011.

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Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 19 2024 - 7:16am*):

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