‘Mama’ is Everything Classic Horror Should Be

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on January 18, 2013 - 10:03am

- Daniel Kash [2]
- Guillermo del Toro [3]
- HollywoodChicago.com Content [4]
- Isabelle Nélisse [5]
- Jessica Chastain [6]
- Mama [7]
- Megan Charpentier [8]
- Movie Review [9]
- Nikolaj Coster-Waldau [10]
- Patrick McDonald [11]
- Universal Pictures [12]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Occasionally, along comes a filmmaker who completely understands what makes a horror film work. “Mama,” the debut of co-writer and director Andy Muschietti, contains creepy children, psychological ramifications, clueless victims and deep mystery. This is both scary and a thriller.

There are even the laughable elements of kitschy characters, which makes it also kind of fun. Jessica Chastain is as miscast as a rocker as she was a CIA operative, but she embraces the character and is completely invested as the victim of the horror. Is there anything more psychological than a mother and child conundrum? Not only does “Mama” exploit this, but it also takes it into new, weird territory. Besides Jessica C., the rest of the cast are unknowns, yet they all have those “certain looks” that are associated with memorable horror film roles. To sum it all up, this film will have an honored place in the annual Halloween horror fests – at home or in theaters.

The story begins in a suburban paradise, a McMansion has an expensive car in front of it with the door open. There are news reports in the air, of an impending economic meltdown and the backlash that it has created – including the man who owns that car and house, who is suspected of killing his business partners and ex-wife. He gathers his daughters Victoria and Lily (eventually portrayed by Megan Charpentier and Isabel Nélisse) into the car, and takes off with them to parts unknown. On the icy road to nowhere, the car flips over the railing and lands near a seemingly abandoned shotgun shack.



Annabel (Jessica Chastain) Checks the Dark Corners in ‘Mama’
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

The father collects his two daughters, ages three and one, and intends to hide out there. A mysterious force is watching them, and causes a severe altering in the girl’s reality. They are found five years later, living like animals in the shack, and referring to an unseen force as their “Mama.” The uncle of the foundlings, Luke (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) – and his rocker girlfriend Annabel (Jessica Chastain) – agree to take care of the kids, as long as Dr. Dreyfuss (Daniel Kash) can keep them close by for his research on their fate. Who is Mama and why she continues her presence is what will become apparent.

The specter of Mama is damn creepy, and makes her appearances when the impact is most shocking. She is not overplayed, which makes her a force of mystery as well as fear, which magnifies the fright. The connection between mother and child is laced into her personality, which is always a problem. The character design is awesome as well, and immediately becomes an unforgettable creature. In the age of free reign in the possibilities with special effects, it is refreshing – and scary – to experience a unique horror persona.

The film is produced by Guillermo del Toro, who created a similar mystery and atmosphere in “Pan’s Labyrinth.” The keys to a good scare is a well thought out story for the team of “Mama,” and carefully setting up the elements in proper sequence is essential to making it all work. We’ve seen the dark therapist, dusty archivist, evil parent and disturbing children in horror films before, but they are most effective when their actions have motivation and their mystery is interesting for everyone to care. All this comes together in “Mama,” and it results in a the requisite spine tingle.

The cast fulfills their role, against the ghostly designed Mama, as the human dupes. Jessica Chastain approaches parody in her portrayal of a black-wigged rocker chick, but her standing as a fine actor creates something extra for the scare portion of the role. Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, as the determined yet perplexed uncle, becomes a significant early victim, but keeps coming at Mama. The darkness of the psychological therapist is perfectly cast in Daniel Kash. This character type is a horror film convention – somebody has to try to figure everything out – and in the case of Dr. Dreyfuss there is a comeuppance for sticking his nose in it all. As it should be for shrinks.



Lily and Victoria (Isabel Nélisse, Megan Charpentier) Try to Adapt in ‘Mama’
Photo credit: Universal Pictures

There are some sticking points in the early part of the story, but the longer set-up is worth what happens later. Some of the scares are of the “boo!” variety, but why not? It’s a freaking horror film. In the long parade of the pretenders, Mama is a contender with staying power. If you’re a fan boy or girl of the scary movie, this one will satisfy your psychological desires for many Halloweens to come. Just make sure to sit in the dark while the movie unfurls.

What is mainly perplexing about “Mama” is why it was released in January and not October, the fright month. It has a mainline star, a creature that bumps in the night and nightmare inducing children. Everything to keep scaring us in this exceedingly scary universe.

“Mama” opens everywhere on January 18th. Featuring Jessica Chastain, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, Daniel Kash, Megan Charpentier and Isabelle Nélisse. Written by Andy Muschietti, Neil Cross and Barbara Muschietti. Directed by Andy Muschietti. Rated “PG-13”

[13]

By PATRICK McDONALD [14]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [13]

© 2013 Patrick McDonald, HollywoodChicago.com

Source URL (retrieved on *Mar 29 2024 - 9:42am*):
http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/21089/mama-is-everything-classic-horror-should-be

Links:
[1] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hankq
[2] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/daniel-kash
[3] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/guillermo-del-toro
[4] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/hollywoodchicagocom-content
[5] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/isabelle-n-lisse
[6] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jessica-chastain
[7] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/mama
[8] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/megan-charpentier
[9] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html
[10] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/nikolaj-coster-waldau
[11] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/patrick-mcdonald
[12] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/universal-pictures
[13] mailto:pat@hollywoodchicago.com
[14] http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#PAT