

## Superlative 'The Guest' Returns a Soldier to Our Times

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on September 17, 2014 - 5:48pm

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The essential killing machine to protect the Homeland hasn't been invented yet. Or has it? Filmmakers Adam Wingard and Simon Barrett combine "The Terminator" with a perfect metaphor for perpetual war in a new release, "The Guest."

British actor Dan Stevens plays a gee-whiz returning soldier from the Iraq conflict, dropping in on the household of a dead comrade. Director Wingard and screenwriter Barrett fashion a narrative in which the "guest" becomes a protector, offering solutions to the family's problems. The packaging of the story is a slick reminder of James Cameron's "The Terminator" and the Frankenstein myth, paired with a poignant metaphor for the break-it-bought-it mentality of America's current Middle East circumstances. What seems like the guest's "solutions" only generates more chaos, which is familiar in this week's headlines. There are no solutions in fighting this war, only consequences.

David (Dan Stevens) is an Iraq War veteran who takes it upon himself to become the "guest" of his dead platoon mate's family. Mother Laura (Sheila Kelley) is most accepting, but eventually David ingratiates himself within the entire household, which includes father Spencer (Leland Orser), brother Luke (Brendan Meyer) older sister Anna (Maika Monroe).



David (Dan Stevens) Takes Aim in 'The Guest'

Photo credit: *Picturehouse*

There is something odd about the veteran, and Anna notices it first. With a little digging, his service is not traceable. It turns out David is part of a conditioning experiment from the defense industry, and is programmed to protect and serve. He takes it to the extreme with his adopted family, and his actions produce consequences for the family and their community.

This is an essential sci-fi thriller, as it manufactures several levels of paranoia, cold calculation and karma retribution. This is a mirror held up to anyone who fears who we're "fighting," because in the end we're actually constructing a battleground within ourselves. To make a returning Middle East veteran into a virtual killing machine becomes the right symbol for perpetual warfare, which inevitably will come back – at least psychologically – to our shores.

Stevens lights up the screen with the portrayal of David, and never flinches from being who he has become. There is a great barroom scene where he takes on a bunch of fascist bullies – and of course it's sympathetic – but unlike the do-gooder protections of Schwarzenegger in "Terminator 2," the flip side of David becomes a chilling nightmare, brought to epic conclusion in a Halloween "funhouse." The film is ripe with sardonic nudges like that.

And beyond the role of David, the film features sharp casting. Maika Monroe is a white trashy Nancy Drew as Anna, and projects a feminist determination that is paired with a character who displays refreshing curiosity. Leland Orser sets the right tone for the beleaguered father, symbolizing the dashed American dreams of the now unimportant middle class, who give up their sons to fight wars for rich oligarchs. Sheila Kelley as the mother is also intriguing – she lends her natural hangdog expression to some effective scene work.



Luke (Brendan Meyer) and Anna (Maika Monroe) Get Lost in the Funhouse in 'The Guest'

Photo credit: Picturehouse

Where the film also shines is in the tweaking of the science fiction thriller genre of the "Terminator" era, which includes the hapless bureaucracy on display in 1983's "WarGames." The defense contractor, actually looking to profit from their creation, just freaks out when their Frankenstein monster goes in another direction, and then can't stop it themselves. This is another perfect symbol for the unending, unyielding and current war strategies.

There is wit, thrills and heroics aplenty in "The Guest," and of course a hint towards a sequel. If the story continues, let's hope that David doesn't become any more than what he is, a pawn in the virtual game of war and risk, in which every new move leads to more and bitter failure.

*"The Guest" opens everywhere on September 17th. Featuring Dan Stevens, Sheila Kelley, Maika Monroe, Leland Orser, Brendan Meyer and Lance Reddick. Written by Simon Barrett. Directed by Adam Wingard. Rated "R"*



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