Despite Same Stale Producer, ‘The Gallows’ a Refreshing Horror Original From New Filmmakers

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – We all know dramatic films win most of the awards, comedies are hit or miss and horrors often don’t deliver the scares they promise. The problem with the horror genre lately is Hollywood is afraid to go against a “proven” formula (for financial reasons) and *really* think outside the box.

After 2009’s “Paranormal Activity” took the world by storm (grossing $193 million worldwide on a tiny $15,000 production budget), producing it paved the way for Jason Blum and his Blumhouse Productions to produce and put his stamp on “Insidious,” “Sinister,” “The Purge,” “Ouija,” “The Lazarus Effect,” “The Boy Next Door,” “Jessabelle,” “Unfriended,” “Oculus” and all of their follow-ups. There pretty much isn’t a horror film released by Hollywood these days without Jason Blum attached to it. That’s a double-edged, monopolistic sword that has been producing new films without continuing to innovate.

So when I first heard about the new horror film “The Gallows” from no-name filmmakers and the same Jason Blum machine, I couldn’t help but think it’d be the same formula and the same let down. But thankfully, it appears “The Gallows” was much more heavily influenced by its brand-new filmmakers than Blum’s more-of-the-same thinking.



Cassidy Gifford as Cassidy Spilker in “The Gallows”.

Image credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

Filmmakers Chris Lofing and Travis Cluff, who HollywoodChicago.com recently photographed [19] and interviewed [20] at the Music Box Theatre, still have a grassroots and humble feel to them even though they are their film are becoming famous now. When we photographed Chris and Travis [21] at a tiny red carpet in front of the Music Box, they looked around – confused – as if to expect the cameras should be pointing at bigger, more known celebs.

But the cameras were for Chris and Travis and they are the reason “The Gallows” delivers as an effective new horror film – despite it having the fancy Blum backing and the big-time Warner Bros. global distribution and New Line Cinema production. (Tremendum Pictures, by the way, is Travis Cluff’s production company.) “The Gallows” opened to 2,729 theatres on July 10, 2015, and in its first full day of release, made back its production budget of a mere $100,000 (yes, think back to the initial “Paranormal Activity”) by 45 times with a box-office grab of $4.5 million. That’ll only grow as the weeks wear on and Chris and Travis will continue to get courted for their next projects.

What’s most special about “The Gallows” is its ability to capture some of the originality that the hugely successful “Paranormal Activity” and “The Blair Witch Project” did, but it’s now doing so in a time when that’s all been done before and it’s getting overdone to death. While it’s not immune to plot holes and discussing the film with fellow movie watchers will reveal some problems, originality was very important to Chris and Travis and you can see that theme clearly with their unexpected cinematic decisions.



From left to right: “The Gallows” writers and directors Chris Lofing and Travis Cluff with HollywoodChicago.com publisher Adam Fendelman at the Music Box Theatre on July 2, 2015.

Image credit: Adam Fendelman

And surprisingly, while I usually feel physically sick from the shakiness of found-footage films rather than the scariness of the content, this one for some reason didn’t really do that to me. It kept me engaged, entertained and always wondering what would happen next.

Chris and Travis started honing this story in 2011. They patiently workshopped it and engaged their new fan base for the last four years. They want their spiritual villain, Charlie Grimille, to be a household horror name on a pedestal as high as Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees. And depending on how much money “The Gallows” ends up earning, Chris and Travis are already thinking about a sequel.

The story is refreshingly original. While it evolves into the paranormal in ways I would have expected, it’s not nearly as ridiculously forced and artificial like how many other recent horror films have done it including the critically panned movies “The Lazarus Effect,” “Tusk,” “Jessabelle,” 2014’s “Deliver Us From Evil,” “Annabelle,” “The ABCs of Death” and 2015’s “Poltergeist”.



Pfeifer Brown as Pfeifer Ross and Reese Mishler as Reese Houser in “The Gallows”.
Image credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

The story is simple. High school kids put on a high school play 20 years ago and the staged hanging in it actually and accidentally happens. Rocking the school and changing it forever, the present-day high school makes the ill-advised decision to re-stage the play all over again. Of course, this summons the nefarious spirit from 20 years ago who has unresolved issues with the human world. Charlie has been waiting patiently for the school’s revival of the play and, of course, for Chris and Travis to make the film.

Like many of these new horror films (that become a franchise), the cast doesn’t rely on “A”-list actors (but, by the way, Cassidy Gifford as Cassidy Spilker is actually Kathie Lee Gifford’s daughter). It can get by because it has the same heavy-hitter horror producer and mainstream distribution. What I like most about “The Gallows,” though, is that big-name credence hasn’t overpowered these new filmmakers and they’ve gotten a chance for their vision to be the primary driving force. The film feels like a grassroots indie from eager, bright-eyed, new filmmakers who genuinely just want to scare and thrill you.

All propelled by a broken high school door that the kids sneak into the night before the revived play debuts, it’s this same door that supernaturally locks when our unfriendly high school ghost gets royally pissed off. Being trapped in the dark, the mysterious high school serves as perfect breeding ground for genuine scares. It’s amazing how much a place looks different at night versus the day. These new actors even say so in the film and ultimately experience their high school in its most menacing moment.



Cassidy Gifford as Cassidy Spilker in “The Gallows”.
Image credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

While the locked-in plot is a simple but effective story construction, our new filmmakers creatively spin it in many unexpected ways through paranormal manipulation and confusion, separating the actors so they’re alone and picking them off one at a time.

Its timing was even lucky. The distributors were rumored to have created the popular #CharlieCharlieChallenge [22] – to summon Mexican demons (like Bloody Mary back in the day) – that went viral in May 2015 as a marketing ploy. However, the challenge actually started popping up on YouTube long before the film was even made, and only after it became a sensation did the filmmakers decide to use the game in some marketing.

The film's final act serves as a satisfying climax by revealing a hidden back story. Yes, this film actually has a meaty story, which is more than many horror films of late can claim. Throughout, "The Gallows" shows patience and restraint by keeping our villain mostly hidden and inside the fear of our imagination – in much the same way "Signs" with Mel Gibson kept teasing but didn't show us much of the aliens.

It's unfortunate that "The Gallows" decides to blow its mystery in its very final frame, which it works for 81 minutes to develop. That final frame cheapens the film's entire intrigue. Whether intentional or not, it's an unoriginal steal from the very final frame of "Sinister" where we finally clearly see Bughuul. Yes, that's another Jason Blum production, and it is recycled formulaic decisions like this that have made most new horror films suffer by going back to the same old well.

"The Gallows" stars Reese Mishler, Pfeifer Brown, Ryan Shoos, Cassidy Gifford, Travis Cluff, Price T. Morgan, Theo Burkhardt and David Herrera from writers and directors Chris Lofing and Travis Cluff and producer Jason Blum. It has a running time of 81 minutes and released on July 10, 2015. "The Gallows" is rated "R" for some disturbing violent content and terror.


[23]

By ADAM FENDELMAN [24]
Publisher
HollywoodChicago.com
adam@hollywoodchicago.com [23]

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