

Something Wicked This Way Comes in 'The Witch'

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – We perpetuate our fears through many sources. All mythology, religion and politics are based on what is “unknown” in our lives, and the desire to placate what frightens us is how we invent and worship those entities. This is all explored in the new film, “The Witch.”

There is horror in this story, a mix of natural and supernatural elements that plague a family of British Puritan settlers in the 17th century, in the New World of America. But the horror is also based in doubt, when the land and nature conspires against survival. This doubt morphs to darkness, and that lack of light is not healed through the extreme Christian faith of the family. “What is in the woods?” “Why is my body changing, and why is that accompanied with feelings previously not known?” “Where is our God?” It must be a supernatural power, it must be a witch. They accuse, I accuse, we accuse, and all the forces that embrace and ensnare the soul are now part of the spell.

The family is exiled from a larger plantation community, because their religiosity causes extreme dread for the rest of the settlement in the New World of 1630. The father William (Ralph Ineson), his wife Katherine (Kate Dickie) – who has just given birth to an infant son – and older daughter Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), son Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw) and younger twins Mercy and Jonas (Ellie Grainger and Lucas Dawson) eventually carve a homestead and failing farm on the edge of a dark wooded area.



Father (Ralph Ineson) Incants in 'The Witch'

Photo credit: A24

Thomasin is playing with her new baby brother when the child disappears. It could be a wolf, or it could be forces outside what they know. Creeping paranoia begins to infiltrate their survival instincts, and all bad things starts to happen, with the aid of an old hag (Bathsheba Garnett) who plagues the vision of Caleb and invades the consciousness of Thomasin. The familiar structure of family and faith start to collapse.

The pacing of the film is deliberate, with natural and supernatural elements fighting within all of the physically and morally hungry family. The mother Katherine is black with depression over the loss of her child, and chalks up every unusual circumstance through the loss of God. The father is a feckless reactor, who feels his failure for bringing his family to this harsh land, and manifests this guilt in anger. Thomasin and Caleb are on the edge of their adolescent evolution, and are confused about the new feelings that are emerging. And twins, well, they tend to spawn connections beyond understanding.

And that is what writer/director Robert Eggers does in this film, he takes the myths of these now ancient ancestors and injects them directly into their beings, during a mysterious time of "civilization," when the stories of the Christ defined a human being more than the realities of life. The setting and burdens are decidedly different, but the light and darkness associated with this inner battle between perceived good and evil (sexual desire, for example) were –and still are – in unforgivable conflict.

The performances are spot on, given the intensity of each actor's assignment. The story focuses on Thomasin, and the actress Anya Taylor-Joy goes through almost the entire spectrum of the human condition with grace and mystery. Kate Dickie brings existential desperation to a new level as a distraught mother, and Harvey Scrimshaw as Caleb practically has to perform his pubescence on screen. It was remarkable casting, and that includes the performances of the father character and the twins.



Into the Woods: Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy) in 'The Witch'

Photo credit: A24

There are conflicts between what is in the minds of the dying humanity, and what is actually happening in the woods and at the homestead. There are many hyper-realized moments which can be interpreted as real or not, given what each of the family members are going through. The muddling took some adjustment, and may be perplexing, but the film lends itself to many levels of orientation. "What is essential is invisible to the eye."

This is Robert Eggers major film debut as a writer/director, after working as a production designer on several films in the same vein of horror mystery. He is a promising new voice, taking what is unknown and revealing it within the consequence of the war between hope and fear.

[CLICK HERE \[18\]](#) for the HollywoodChicago.com interview of writer/director Robert Eggers of "The Witch."

"The Witch" opens everywhere on February 19th. Featuring Anya-Taylor Joy, Ralph Ineson, Harvey Scrimshaw, Ellie Grainger, Lucas Dawson and Kate Dickie. Written and directed by Robert Eggers. Rated "R"



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