

Less Black Magic, More Black Mirror is a Success in 'Child's Play'

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are some fears in this world that seem irrational to us. Like a fear of clowns or the fear of using an elevator. Horror films are at the core of some of these fears, with the truly great ones creating new things to fear. The “Child’s Play” franchise may have had its roots in psychopathic soul transfers, but the update focuses on the ghost in the machine.

There is nothing that can ever or will ever come close to replacing Don Mancini’s iconic “Child’s Play” saga, and luckily this reboot doesn’t even consider trying. Even the worst of the films were absolute products of their time. The poorly-aged humor and very early-2000s narrative aesthetic clearly mark each of them, like a cinematic brand etched into each installment. For better or worse, this cinematic universe has reached cult status, especially in its own mind. No sequel or reboot of the original premise could have done the material any justice, but this new “Child’s Play” doesn’t repackage our old friend, but does a complete rebranding. While it chucks the original black magic for a black mirror approach, “Child’s Play” ends up creating a justifiable timeliness for this successfully killer reboot.

An injection of new blood is exactly what was needed to jump-start this new iteration of “Child’s Play”, and we get that with a filmmaking team that can mark this as their feature film debut. Director Lars Klevberg and writer Tyler Burton Smith both work together to create a new horror film that combines different genres and past story ideas together to create a contemporary tale that exists well within the world we currently live in. Not to be confused at all with creating something completely new because let’s face it, this Chucky movie doesn’t come close to breaking the mold. What Tyler Burton Smith does instead is take a look at the current state of childhood in the age of technology and social media, and molds a monster out of that.



Photo credit: Orion Pictures

Once we look past the ridiculous origins of the rogue Buddi doll (voiced by none other than Mark Hamill), we can finally get into this cautionary tale against the all-consuming nature of technology. Smith completely does away with the voodoo and replaces it with a learning robot. The most compelling part about this new Chucky is that as you watch it, you actually feel a sort of sympathy for the doll because it's only mission was to make his best friend Andy (Gabriel Bateman) happy. Chucky, as he so hilariously names himself, starts off with the same childlike innocence that every artificial intelligence (and human child for that matter) begins life with. Only through experience does it become able to learn about the world, but at the same time, this does not teach much about morality. Of course, any empathy only goes so far because this is still a killer doll, but the fact that there was any to feel at all is already a step in the right direction.

One of my biggest pet peeves about the "Child's Play" franchise was just how easily this plastic doll could take down an adult. I understand the game of cat and mouse, catching them by surprise, but there are moments in the older films where there is a physical struggle that just becomes laughable. The integration of the technological element this time around provides a much better set up for some of the kills, and gives us a more grounded explanation of how this Alexa-like interfaced doll is able to use the environment to set up his prey. One of the aspects that do make their way over from the original is the brutality, which Klevberg doesn't shy away from. Those of you looking forward to the gore that Chucky usually leaves in his wake won't leave disappointed; those of you who don't like the dolls redesign ultimately will.

Klevberg does his best to blend the many tones within the film, and he comes off mostly successful. Aside from the first few minutes, the technology aspect is well-incorporated and gives the film an immediacy that rationalizes the need for a reboot. The horror build-up is much more subtly developed than the original because instead of having the monster already introduced right away, we witness its inevitable creation. One of the more fun aspects aside from the casual humor sewn throughout is the teaming up that places during the climax of the film, where we definitely see influences from the producers who did 2017's "IT".



Photo credit: Orion Pictures

Brad Dourif, who was the voice of Chucky for the past 30 years, gave life to the toy and may even be responsible for a nightmare or two at some point in your life. That unmistakable voice has reached legendary status, with malevolence bleeding out of every decibel in every word uttered. There will never be anyone to replace Dourif, but Mark Hamill does a great job voicing a new creation entirely. Because this Chucky wasn't born evil, we shouldn't be able to hear any sort of darkness in his voice from the beginning, and Hamill does a great job nuancing the character by raising the sinister notes the further we get in. Starring alongside the likes of natural comedians Aubrey Plaza and Brian Tyree Henry, we are able to get a good balance of humor, drama, horror, and childlike wonder (from Gabriel Bateman) that makes this film worth your attention.

"Child's Play" opened everywhere on June 21st. Featuring Aubrey Plaza, Mark Hamill, Gabriel Bateman, Brian Tyree Henry, Beatrice Kitsos, and Ty Consiglio. Directed by Lars Klevberg. Written by Tyler Burton Smith. Rated "R"



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By [JON ESPINO](#) [18]
Film & Video Game Critic
HollywoodChicago.com
jon@hollywoodchicago.com [17]

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