

Effective Remake of ‘The Last House on the Left’ a Powerful Horror Film

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 13, 2009 - 12:30pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – [Dennis Illiadis](#) [15]’ remake of “[The Last House on the Left](#) [16]” is the exception the proves the rule that most horror movie remakes are a complete waste of time. With an incredible performance by [Garret Dillahunt](#) [17] (“[Deadwood](#) [18],” “The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford”) and great supporting work by [Monica Potter](#) [19], [Sara Paxton](#) [20], [Tony Goldwyn](#) [21], and others, “Last House” is the best mainstream horror movie in a long time.

Emphasis on the word *horror*, something you don’t see that often in movies of the genre that bears its name. In the ’80s, the slasher pic pushed the horror genre closer to the action genre asking audiences to cheer the murder of each nubile teen and running victim. Atmosphere and true, honest dread weren’t as important as a quality kill.



The evil Krug (Garret Dillahunt) taunts his captive, Mari (Sara Paxton).

Photo credit: Lacey Terrell and Rogue/Universal

Of course, modern, post-slasher horror is closer to mystery with each movie trying to top another with its twist ending. There’s nothing remotely scary about any of the “[Saw](#) [22]” sequels. It’s the mystery of the puzzles that brings people back. Gory, yes. Honest horror? No.

Which brings me back to “The Last House on the Left,” a truly horrifying experience. This is not for the faint of heart. I can almost guarantee you that people will walk out of the theater you see it in. The TV commercials make it look like just another cookie cutter slasher pic and people might not be prepared for what they’re about to see. “Last House on the Left” is about awful, irredeemable people doing vicious things to good people and the tables being turned.

“Last House on the Left” is a three-act, three-set piece with only eight characters. The story has been told twice before in “The Virgin Spring” and Wes Craven’s original-and-influential “Last House”.

The set-up for “Last House” is simple - If you knew that guests in your house had done something horrific to your child, how would you react? Would you ever let them leave? It’s been filmed before and been told for much longer than that - good guys are hurt by bad guys and then people related to the good guys get revenge. It’s as old as storytelling. Without the gimmicks of modern horror, the success or failure of a film like “Last House on the Left” comes down to the execution (no pun intended).

Two of the “good guys,” Mari Collingwood (Sara Paxton) and her friend Paige ([Martha Maclsaac](#) [23]), make the mistake of following a sweet boy named Justin ([Spencer Treat Clark](#) [24]) back to his hotel room to hang out, flirt, and smoke some pot. Justin seems cautious but he thinks his family isn’t coming back for a long time. He’s wrong. And when his family returns, the nightmare begins.

Justin’s relatives would make most movie serial killers turn away in disgust. Led by the terrifying Krug (Garret Dillahunt) and assisted by the wacky Sadie ([Riki Lindhome](#) [25]) and vicious Francis ([Aaron Paul](#) [26]), Justin’s family kidnaps Paige and Mari and drive off into the distance.



(L to R) Francis (Aaron Paul), Krug (Garret Dillahunt), Justin (Spencer Treat Clark) and Sadie (Riki Lindhome) knock on the door.

Photo credit: Lacey Terrell and Rogue/Universal

After an escape attempt from a moving car, Paige and Mari are tortured in the woods. Paige is cut and lies bleeding to death while Mari is raped and shot. None of this is presented in your typical mainstream horror movie way. It will turn your stomach. It will make your skin crawl. It’s not as vicious as the Craven film, but it’s stunning for a widely released film.

Some will wonder why they need to see such pain, but it’s a necessary darkness to make the final act effective. If it was softened in any way, the revenge act wouldn’t work. Iliadis knows that he has to take the film deep into the dark side to make it not feel like torture porn.

Krug, Sadie, Francis, and Justin make it out of the woods and to the closest house, which happens to be owned by John (Tony Goldwyn) and Emma Collingwood (Monica Potter), the parents of the girl they just brutalized and left to die. The tension in the mid-section before either side knows the terrifying tie that binds them is insanely well-done. Using almost entirely handheld cameras, natural low-level light sources, and the sound of pounding rain, Iliadis takes his time and it’s this section of the film that truly sets it apart.

So many other filmmakers would have sped from one violent sequence to another but Iliadis understands that it’s the time in between that will truly get under the skin of the viewer. As John tends to the wounds that were created by his own child and Mari makes hot chocolate for the boy who lured her daughter to the hotel, you’ll want to scream at the screen. It’s remarkable filmmaking that won’t get nearly the critical credit it deserves.



Dr. John (Tony Goldwyn) and Emma Collingwood (Monica Potter) hunt killers.

Photo credit: Lacey Terrell and Rogue/Universal

You won't see a movie as violent as "The Last House on the Left" for a long time but (for the most part) this is a film that's not extreme just to be shocking and different. Iliadis understands the difference between shock and tension. When the audience bursts into applause as each villain gets what's coming to them, it's because the tension is finally released. It's a pressure valve of applause.

Now, there are a few problems with "Last House," all of which could have been easily fixed. Like most movies, it ends two minutes too late (the last shot is embarrassing). The score, with its loud guitar chords, betrays the realism of the rest of the piece and should have been softened or changed entirely.

And there's a bit too much fetishization of Mari in the opening scenes as she strips to go for a swim and then we watch her getting dressed. In a film of extremes, these moments feel the most like exploitation, like if we didn't see how hot Mari is at the beginning, we wouldn't care about her plight later. It made me feel a little queasy.

There's also a bit too much slo-mo in the final act to make it truly effective. "Last House" works best when it stays realistic not with slo-mo or an overdone score.

But these are minor complaints in a genre where it's usually easy to come up with major ones. "Last House on the Left" may not be a perfect horror film but it could easily be the closest thing to one that we're going to see for a long time.

'The Last House on the Left' stars Garret Dillahunt, Sara Paxton, Monica Potter, Tony Goldwyn, Spencer Treat Clark, Martha MacIsaac, Aaron Paul, and Riki Lindhome. It was written by Adam Alleca and Carl Ellsworth and was directed by Dennis Iliadis. It opens on March 13th, 2009. It is rated R.



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