

Blu-ray Review: 'Silent House' Pulls Off Ambitious Stunt with Mixed Results

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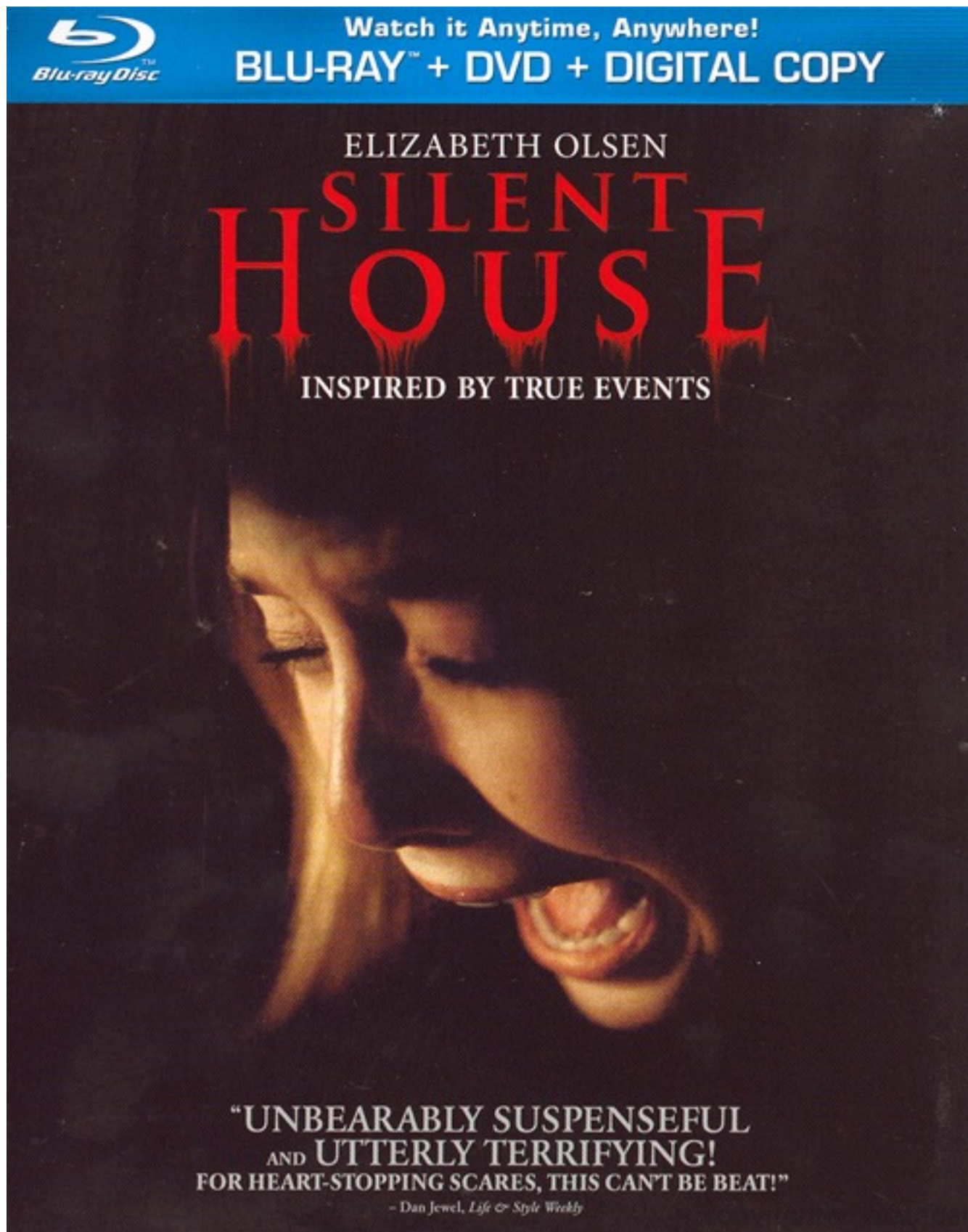
CHICAGO – “Silent House” inspires the same strange mixture of feelings that I felt while watching fascinating yet severely flawed pictures like “The Life Aquatic” or “I Heart Huckabees.” My rational mind recognizes that the film doesn’t quite work, and yet my inner cinephile urges me to recommend it anyway. Here’s a movie that’s nearly worth seeing in spite of itself.

The directing team of Chris Kentis and Laura Lau made an enormous impression on horror fans with their 2003 indie hit, “Open Water,” which remains one of the scariest films of the last decade. For the majority of its running time, the film centered on the bobbing heads of a couple hopelessly stranded in the middle of shark-infested waters. By following the premise to its logical conclusion, the film refused to loosen its grip on viewers’ imaginations, while masterfully playing on their most primal fears.



Blu-ray Rating: **2.5/5.0**

In their latest feature effort, Kentis and Lau have attempted a feat no less audacious, yet it falls far short of triumphant. Based on Gustavo Hernández’s 2010 Uruguayan thriller, “La casa muda,” “House” seamlessly interweaves a series of long, fluid shots to resemble one unbroken take. Its imagery is inherently entrancing, but Nathan Larson’s intrusive score repeatedly destroys the illusion of realism with an excess of loud clangs on the soundtrack. The film’s strongest asset is its leading lady, Elizabeth Olsen, who galvanized festivalgoers last year with her riveting turn in this film, as well as Sean Durkin’s masterwork, “Martha Marcy May Marlene.” Since the entirety of “House” is viewed through the perspective of Olsen’s character, Sarah, her face has a tendency to fill the frame, and what a radiant face it is. The more haunted she becomes, the more her beauty is accentuated, and cinematographer Igor Martinovic (“Man on Wire”) often films her from a high angle that allows her well-lit breasts to be prominently framed. Most of her dialogue is in the form of screaming, and Olsen finds endless effective ways of conveying her mounting terror. When she spots a menacing threat in her rearview mirror, Sarah’s shock causes her to choke on her own frightened shrieks. Her performance consumes the audience within her moment-to-moment experience and creates a fine duet with Martinovic’s lens, at least for the first two-thirds.



Silent House was released on Blu-ray and DVD on July 24, 2012.

Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Entertainment

As the film opens, Sarah navigates her way through the shadows of a lakeside retreat that her father (Adam Trese) and uncle (Eric Sheffer Stevens) intend on selling. A young woman (Julia Taylor Ross) materializes on the porch, identifying herself as Sarah's neighbor and claiming to have known her when they were younger. As Sarah struggles to recall the woman's face, the scene builds a palpable sense of unease. It's not long afterward that Sarah suddenly finds herself trapped in the house, while her father turns up bloodied and unconscious. Blurred figures appear to be staring at her from every hallway, as Sarah desperately tries to escape certain doom. The film suggests several possibilities of what could be happening: the house is haunted, Sarah is losing her mind or homicidal house invaders are playing games of psychological torture. All three possibilities are pretty far-fetched, but nowhere near as outlandish as the twist that unveils itself in the final ten minutes. It's such a bizarre twist that it kills off any sense of dread and leaves the audience with nothing to haunt their nightmares. Whereas the tension in Durkin's film continues to grow after the final frame, "House" ends on a note of downbeat flatness. After a vibrant assortment of creaks and booms, the picture lands with a resounding thud.

"Silent House" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.85:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English, Spanish and French subtitles, and includes a pocket BLU app, as well as Blu-ray, DVD, UltraViolet and digital copies of the film. On the highly entertaining audio commentary track, Kentis and Lau highlight the Olympian achievements of their skilled cameramen, including the assistant whose parkour skills enabled him to run alongside Olsen as she dashed across the yard. For the opening shot, Martinovic was lowered in a crane before stepping onto the ground and continuing to follow Olsen with the camera. The formidable logistics of Martinovic's maneuvering coupled with high winds made the shot seem impossible, until the miraculous take was filmed that appears in the final cut. For students of cinematography, "House" is worth seeing purely on the basis of its extraordinary camerawork. As a horror film, however, it doesn't quite work. (Spoiler Alert!) It's only clear in the final scenes that the filmmakers were attempting to construct a Lynchian dreamscape that externalized a psyche damaged by sexual abuse. Lau mentions that Donald Kalsched's "The Inner World of Trauma," assisted her in crafting Sarah's "archetypal defenses" that masquerade as the story of the first two acts, which is essentially one giant red herring. Alas, the film lacks the psychological depth necessary to make this narrative subversion resonate as anything other than a hollow stunt.

'Silent House' is released by Universal Studios Home Entertainment and stars Elizabeth Olsen, Adam Trese, Eric Sheffer Stevens and Julia Taylor Ross. It was written by Laura Lau and directed by Chris Kentis and Laura Lau. It was released on July 24, 2012. It is rated R.



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