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Case 39

Reviewed by **Bill Gibron** on Sep 30 2010



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It should surprise no one that the "new" Renee Zellweger thriller *Case 39* has sat on the shelf since finishing production back in 2006. Sure, there was an obligatory release to England and the rest of Europe last year, but for the most part, Paramount has little faith in this supernatural fright film...and with good reason. While the basic premise -- lost little girl who might actually be a demonic presence -- has more than enough potential, the execution is weak and the performances are beyond bland.

Our star plays Emily Jenkins, an overwrought social worker trying to maneuver the maniacal bureaucracy of her glorified governmental position. Already handling 38 stress-inducing cases, she is nonetheless larded with number 39 -- 10-year-old Lillith Sullivan (Jodelle Ferland). With her grades dropping and signs of neglect everywhere, Lillith becomes an instant priority, and when Jenkins shows up with cop buddy Mike Barron (Ian McShane) and discovers the parents trying to lock the child in the oven, the girl is immediately rescued. Concerned that the state will not protect Lillith, Jenkins takes the unusual step of fostering the girl herself.

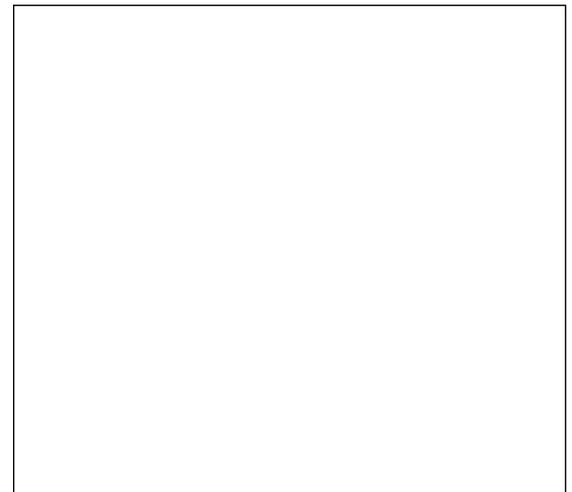
Without warning, odd things start happening. A young boy who Jenkins works with murders his parents. Then, a child psychologist friend named Douglas Ames (Bradley Cooper) dies mysteriously. It's not long before Jenkins is thinking that Lillith has something to do with



Bill Gibron

Bill Gibron is a veteran film critic from Tampa, Florida.
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Film:	Case 39
Starring:	Renée Zellweger, Jodelle Ferland, Ian McShane, Bradley Cooper, Kerry O'Malley, Callum Keith Rennie, Adrian Lester
Director:	Christian Alvart
Screenwriter:	Ray Wright
Producer:	Steve Golin, Kevin Misher
Genre:	Horror
MPAA Rating:	R
Year:	2010

these deaths. A visit to the prison holding the girl's parents confirms her worst fears. It is now up to our heroine to destroy the evil entity before it swallows her soul -- and then finds another adoptive family to infiltrate and destroy.

Nothing good has ever come out of a delayed release -- and *Case 39* is limping, languid proof of such an industry adage. Director Christian Alvart obvious sparked some studio interest with his German crime drama *Antibodies*. He was immediately tagged to take on this Zellweger vanity project, and then moved on to attempt the *Event Horizon* rip-off *Pandorum*. In both cases, his ambitions couldn't match his moviemaking acumen. *Case 39* is overlong, clocking in at nearly 110 minutes, and underdeveloped. We expect a combination of *The Bad Seed* and *The Exorcist*. What we get instead is lots of Zellweger's puffy pout, her slit-eyed superficiality, and way too many CG hornets. We want to see pre-adolescent fire and brimstone. The final cut only offers flatness and boredom.

Granted, there are individual moments here and there where Alvart gets things going. When Jenkins discovers the truth about Lillith and locks herself in her well barricaded bedroom, the wooden door stand-off with the kid is sensational. Similarly, the paranormal payback our villainess bestows upon her parents is terrific. But these are limited examples of movie macabre splash. For the most part, *Case 39* is a drawn out deconstruction of child welfare and those who struggle within the system. We know almost nothing about how Lillith became "possessed", or perhaps more directly, how she became a Satanic spawn. The ethics over playing guardian for such a little Lucifer? We learn them by rote.

A few years back, multi-Oscar winner Hillary Swank headed down similar scare territory with her Beelzebub-on-the-Bayou effort *The Reaping*. Clearly, *Case 39* could learn a thing or two from that earlier Revelation-based spectacle. It's always better to show your impending doom than talk about it incessantly, and yet Zellweger and co. can't help but yak away mercilessly. Before long, we wish the mean ol' Mangoat himself would appear just to shut everybody up. Unlike a fine wine, *Case 39* did not benefit from sitting around in storage. Instead of being creepy, it's corked.

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