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'The Last Exorcism' ★★★

August 27, 2010 | By Robert Abele, Special to Tribune Newspapers



"The Last Exorcism" stirs up a cauldron of hand-held-camera technique, faith-challenged drama and solid acting for a suitably squirmy tale of demonic possession. It won't supplant "The Exorcist," but it stands up nicely to DIY-tinged shiver stalwarts "The Blair Witch Project" and "Paranormal Activity."

Director Daniel Stamm's faux documentary begins as a "Marjoe"-like portrait of Cotton Marcus (Patrick Fabian), a charming huckster preacher who intends to show the film crew how the fake-exorcism business works by taking the case of a distraught, hyper-religious Louisiana farmer (Louis Herthum) who believes the devil has taken hold of his teenage daughter (Ashley Bell).

Naturally, a few freaky incidents point to a situation not so easily explainable, but what roots this chiller beyond a creepily effective farmhouse locale and admirably claustrophobic camerawork are two oft-ignored keys to good horror: humor and performance.

Early laughs from Fabian's lapsed-believer cynicism are like nervous ice-breakers for the second half's grim turn of events, when Bell takes over with an eerie physicality that elicits a potent mixture of fear and sympathy.

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As with many well-intentioned scare flicks, the wrapping-up feels dissipated and obvious, but for a good while "The Last Exorcism" makes for an atmospheric, character-rich stab at movie fright night.

MPPAA rating: PG-13 (for disturbing violent content and terror, some sexual references and thematic material)

Cast: Patrick Fabian (Cotton Marcus), Ashley Bell (Nell Sweetzer), Iris Bahr (Iris Reisen), Louis Herthum (Louis Sweetzer), Caleb Landry Jones (Caleb Sweetzer)

Credits: Directed by Daniel Stamm; written by Huck Botko and Andrew Gurland; produced by Eli Roth, Marc Abraham, Thomas A. Bliss. A Lionsgate release. Running time: 1:28

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