

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: Movie Review: ***Black Christmas (1974)*** - A look at an unforgettable Cult Horror Classic; Plus: A review of the recent ***Black Christmas (2006)*** - February 2007

*Note: The following reviews of the two versions of **Black Christmas** contain some plot details which could be considered spoilers.*

Review of the 1974 Original:

The original ***Black Christmas*** has quite a simple story. A mysterious psychopath sneaks into the attic of a sorority house right before Christmas break and terrorizes the sorority sisters there. First the girls start receiving obscene phone calls and then things get much worse as the unseen assailant begins a killing spree. The police don't really get involved until a 13 year-old girl turns up dead in a local park, and by then it may be too late.

This film is a slow, methodical murder mystery that is truly chilling to watch. While the description I gave in the preceding paragraph really doesn't do it any justice, the simplicity inherent in the story is ultimately what makes the movie so successful. Filmmaker Bob Clark is also successful in utilizing a risky, but ultimately effective, storytelling device. Unlike in many murder mysteries and horror films, here he chooses to show the audience at the outset where the unidentified killer is, in this case in the attic. The audience therefore knows all along while the sorority sisters do not. This throws a blanket of dread and uneasiness over even the most mundane scenes. This sense of terrible things to come is even more disturbing because the cast of female characters are fully fleshed-out and portrayed in a believable way. The casting here was very well done, with the compelling Olivia Hussey and Margot Kidder in two key roles, while the police chief is played by reliable genre veteran John Saxon. Margot Kidder's performance as ill-mannered Barbie Coard is particularly good, while Olivia Hussey

shines as resourceful, yet vulnerable lead Jessica Bradford. There is also a subplot about Jessica's boyfriend Peter (Keir Duella) which both adds to the depth of her character and deepens the mystery in the film. Indeed these are people we quickly get to know and identify with. Had they been the empty-headed model types present in so many teen slasher films today, this could have been an entirely ineffectual movie.

Another effective part of ***Black Christmas*** is the killer himself (or herself). Cinematographer Reg Morris uses some nice POV shots to portray him lurking around. He also uses long, slow tracking shots through different rooms in the house which make it appear as if someone is thoroughly examining every inch of the residence. Despite never being fully seen this is one creepy individual, and the gibberish the girls hear on the phone is particularly bizarre and bone-chilling. His banter is a mixture of perverted heavy breathing, disgusting language, screams, animalistic sounds, and plain nonsensical rants with the occasional utterance of the name "Billy" thrown in for good measure. (We never know who or what Billy is or what it has to do with the murders). And when this person does strike it's even more disturbing. For example while the first death scene isn't bloody or visceral, the image of a young suffocated coed haunts every moment of the rest of the film. * And this death scene is followed by further kills which are just as memorable, including one involving a sharp crystal sculpture that is by turns brutal, shocking and stylistically artistic in the best tradition of a Dario Argento *giallo* film.

Bob Clark's ***Black Christmas*** is a quiet chiller that is hard to forget. This cult gem has also no doubt influenced more well known films that followed such as ***When A Stranger Calls*** and ***Halloween*** to name but a couple. For those who haven't seen it I highly recommend doing so.

Review of the 2006 Remake:

Okay ladies and gentlemen, it's that time again. Time for another... (Drum roll) remake review. Once again I'll omit the long tirade regarding my mixed feelings about remakes and get right to it. At the very beginning of the film this new version of ***Black Christmas*** presents the same basic setup as the original 1974 version (see above). We meet a group of attractive sorority girls spending the Christmas holiday at their dorm house. However here is where any similarity to the original version ends. We learn via flashback the story of yellow-skinned Billy Lenz and his violent, demented past. It seems young Billy was quite a disappointment to his wicked mother, and reminded her only of her husband, whom she hated. With the help of her lover the two murder the husband and lock Billy up in the attic after he witnesses the killing and their subsequent disposal of the body. Some time later his mother has another child named Agnes, who is conceived in, shall we say, a rather unsavory way. Billy's situation is further aggravated when he is given a telescope as a Christmas present and begins spying on people around the neighborhood who look to have normal, pleasant relations. One Christmas grown-up Billy finally snaps, kidnaps Agnes, and murders his mother and stepfather. He then uses a cookie cutter to make flesh cutouts from their corpses, puts his cookies in the oven, and soon sits down for a snack. The police arrive to witness this gruesome scene and Billy is sent off to the insane asylum, until years later when he escapes and returns to his now occupied home. This is when, of course, the killing begins again.

This new version of ***Black Christmas*** was an absolute disaster from beginning to end. It's one of the worst remakes I've seen since ***The Fog 2005*** (see the November TFTM column). The challenge in reviewing it is figuring out where to begin discussing

everything that went wrong. A good place to start is with the “characters”. At the beginning of the movie we meet a group of attractive coeds who are so vacuous and unappealing that one could care less about their fate. The lack of characterization makes the weakest **Friday the 13th** sequel look like high drama by comparison. And the fact that this remake is basically a straightforward, old-school style slasher film spotlights this weakness even more. ** As anyone familiar with the slasher horror film subgenre knows, there is always a clearly identifiable (at some point) Final Girl whom the audience can root for and relate to. In this film all the women (and men) are utterly disposable, and it's anyone's guess who will survive until the end. I can't recall a slasher film in recent memory where I couldn't even at least guess who the Final Girl was until almost the very end. And it should also be noted that the supporting characters were just as ill-defined. For example sorority head Ms. Mac talks early in the film as if she knows all about Billy Lenz and his history, and later asks the boyfriend of one of the girls about him as if she's oblivious to his history. Overall she, like the girls, proves to be a clueless and disposable character.

Lest one think my above criticism relates only to hardcore horror fans or the conventions of the slasher film subgenre, there are also many, many other serious flaws in this movie. For one thing I found the constant flashbacks from year to year in Billy's past to be both confusing and also disruptive to the flow of the film. Generally speaking, I believe it's usually a bad sign when there is an overabundance of flashbacks (or flash forwards) to different time periods using on-screen graphics. Such is the case here, and it just serves to detract from the already weak aforementioned narrative. And it's amazing how with all the talk about Billy in both the past and the present, that the outrageous back-story still seemed confusing and muddled.

One of the most serious things wrong with this film was the absolute lack of suspense or terror in it. The original **Black Christmas** was chilling right from the start, and after the first murder took place there was a constant sense of dread present. After the first murder in this remake it's clear that chills are going to be extremely hard to come by. In fact, it was pretty obvious after that scene that I was in for a campy gore fest at best. Put simply the new version totally discarded everything that worked in the first film, and throughout its running time relied on cheap shock effects and gore to carry it. The killings were both clichéd and predictable, and the utter lack of characterization of the victims (mentioned above) magnified this. In a well-written movie a bit of cliché in the death scenes might not have mattered much, but here the film suffers immensely from it. Also because the story of Billy is so inherently unbelievable, the proceedings quickly turn into one big unintentional joke. And it's worth mentioning also that the totally unnecessary ending hospital sequence, which I won't give away here, thoroughly cements that status on the film.

Other parts of the movie ranged from irritating to offensive and insulting. One thing that annoyed me was the use of several **Scream**-style phone shots. By this I'm referring to the overuse of that now clichéd slow zoom-in on the ominous ringing telephone, indicating that somebody bad is on the other end of the line. This is usually followed by a look of tension and concern on the faces of one or more characters before somebody finally picks it up. Here it's always one of the aforementioned vacuous girls, who follow up the call with moronic remarks about who could possibly be calling them. And if one thinks I'm being overly critical, let it be known that this is a film featuring a scene where one of the sorority babes looks at an ice scraper in wide-eyed bewilderment, claiming to not know what it is. I in turn looked at the screen in wild-eyed bewilderment, not being

able to believe it possible that a college student, no matter how rich and spoiled she may be, could ever have not seen or used an ice scraper before. Rarely does a film sink to the level where I feel personally insulted by it, but such was the case here. This was yet another scene where the inherent stupidity in the movie shone through brightly.

In all fairness it should be pointed out that the ***Black Christmas*** remake did have a couple things going for it. *** On the plus side it was a good-looking film, partly because of the rich holiday colors present in most scenes, and partly because of some interesting, artistic camera angles interspersed throughout. Rich color was also used liberally in the mostly over-the-top, gore-filled murder scenes, which were admittedly wickedly nasty. However these types of scenes alone cannot begin to carry a movie with so many other flaws.

Finally it's also worth noting that this remake was written and directed by ***X-Files*** veteran Glen Morgan, who was a force behind a couple of the ***Final Destination*** movies and the 2003 version of ***Willard*** starring Crispin Glover, among other things. All those projects were quite good in my opinion, and it really surprised me to see his name on this mess of a film. I can only chalk it up to the fact that even talented artists like Mr. Morgan make missteps every now and then, and hope that he gets back on his successful track next time around.

* *Giallo* is a highly stylized filmmaking approach employed by Italian horror masters like Dario Argento and Mario & Lamberto Bava. Some elements of this style include finely detailed and rich visuals, extreme close-ups which heighten emotion and urgency, and liberal use of blood and gore effects. Death scenes employing these *giallo* elements are sometimes labeled *mise-en-scenes*. For some related discussion see the September 2004 TFTM column where I discuss Euro-Horror and the films of Dario Argento.

** The term "Final Girl" is one that comes from the 1992 book *Men, Women & Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* by Carol J. Clover. It refers to the female survivor or heroine in a slasher film. This book has chapters on the slasher, occult, and rape-revenge film genres, and features some fascinating and enlightening insights and perspectives on each.

*** I also liked the colorful and imaginative design on the ***Black Christmas*** remake poster.