

The Babadook (15) Australia 2014

2 November 2015

DIRECTOR: **Jennifer Kent**

Running time: 94 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Essie Davis** (Amelia), **Noah Wiseman** (Samuel), **Hayley McElhinney** (Claire), **Daniel Henshall** (Robbie), **Barbara West** (Mrs. Roach), **Tim Purcell** (the Babadook).

SCRIPT: **Jennifer Kent**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Radoslaw Ladczyk**. EDITING: **Simon Njoo**. MUSIC: **Jed Kurzel**.

The Babadook is a film about mental trauma, and the lasting damage it does to the sufferer. Like *Don't Look Now*, *The Innocents* and *The Shining*, it concerns the effect a past death can have on the living, orchestrating much of its scares around the guilt, fear, grief or rage that might be repressed in the mind of the protagonist. Like those films it also features a child character, but it is the serious psychological import that raises it above the rank of generic frightener and earns it some critical respect.

Lizzie, the mother of the present film, has, as we infer from the opening sequence, been in a car accident in which her husband was killed. What we soon also learn is that it was on the way to the hospital to give birth to her somewhat challenging offspring that the event occurred. Sammy is a pallid child, prone to childish nightmares, a keen amateur magician, fond of manufacturing elaborate weaponry to despatch nocturnal ogres, and given to tantrums and violent behaviour if he does not get what he wants. In looks he is scarcely more endearing, his widely spaced teeth and horrid hair giving him more than a little of the aspect of the Babadook itself (not another demon child horror film? you begin to ask yourself. But no.). Even so, Lizzie finds it hard to love the brat, which makes her feel guilty, all the more so because at the back of her mind she would rather have been left with hubby Oscar and have lost the baby. As you can see, this is dark stuff even before we start.

Being in the habit of reading her son a bedtime story, to dispel the night time fears of bogeymen in the wardrobe and forestall another night spent in bed together (back turned to the child, notice), Lizzie is unsurprisingly put out when her hand falls on a red tome entitled "Mr Babadook", only to discover that the gallows humour text and

fearsome pop-up ghouls are guaranteed to procure her another sleepless night!

The plot thickens when her attempts to destroy the book prove vain, and the 'Dook-dook-dook' that is reputed to herald the approach of the Babadook soon manifests itself in dog-like scratchings and thumps against floorboards.

Lizzie has potential allies in the forms of her Parkinson-suffering next-door neighbour, a colleague at work and her more conventionally middle-class sister, but she is increasingly incapable of calling on their help as events spiral and her own grip on reality loosens. As in all the best haunted house movies, she and little Sammy must fight this one out alone.

Intriguingly, as Lizzie falls victim to the Babadook's deadly game, Sammy's role evolves from potential victim to protector, and, as it does so, he becomes considerably more likeable and 'normal'. The subtext is, of course, that as Lizzie's demons are externalised, so the distorting effect of her resentment on her own view of Sammy is rehabilitated. By this stage, you are beginning to guess at the symbolic identity of this particular ghoul, to the accompaniment of not a little disappointment, perhaps: we do so like our monsters to have teeth. In truth, while the climactic scenes of 'ghost-laying' may just too familiarly recall others from *The Exorcist* onwards, it is in earlier manifestations of unaccountable spookiness that the film displays its virtuosic freshness.

Keeping Up with the Joneses UK 2013

Director: **Michael Pearce** Running time: 28 minutes

MP's wife Celia (Maxine Peake) discovers her husband's true colours when she is taken hostage by his criminal business associates.