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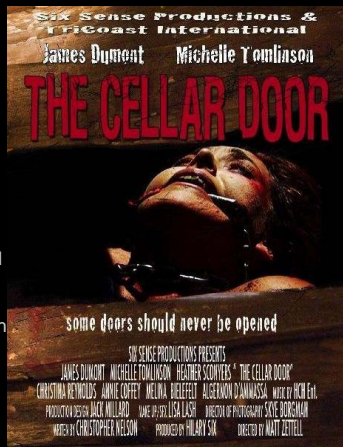
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The Cellar Door

Written by Theron Neel
 Monday, 29 October 2007

PDF PRINT EMAIL

Hollywood is cyclical. We all know this. When one studio releases, say, a "killer meteor" flick, you can be sure several more similarly themed movies will soon rain down upon us like, well, killer meteors. And the more that drop, the worse they'll hurt. Over the past few years, we've been dealing with a rash of "women held captive" movies. Lately, that rash has gotten bad—red, inflamed, painful. Now, I don't object to these films per se, but I'd rather hoped they had run their course, especially after the recent release of *Captivity*, seemingly the nadir of this particular genre.



Then I remembered: All it takes is one film to turn it all around. In this case, that film is *The Cellar Door*, a smart, taut exercise in psychological terror. Directed by Matt Zettell, *The Cellar Door* is the twisted story of Herman (James DuMont) and Rudy (Michelle Tomlinson). Herman is an average guy. He's shy and awkward, and he lives alone and pretty much keeps to himself. He does have one interest, though—he's a collector. He sees a pretty young lady and he collects her...literally. He's even built a cage for these girls in his cellar. Rudy is a normal, attractive young woman. She likes to drink and dance, and she has a roommate. She also has the misfortune to catch Herman's eye.



After a brilliantly tense opening sequence, the film slows down to allow us to get into the story. One day, Herman spies Rudy and her roommate, Christa (Heather Sconyers), at the store. They are fun, flirty girls, walking along and chatting. Herman is immediately hooked. After a night of dancing and drinking, Rudy falls asleep in her bed...and wakes up in the cage in Herman's cellar.

There's not a single unnecessary scene in this film. Each moment feeds the next, which is how it should be but rarely is. Christopher Nelson has provided a tight, subtle script, and the actors make the most of it. Tomlinson and DuMont say as much with their eyes and bodies as they do with their mouths.

The Cellar Door is a smart film that respects its audience enough to not spell out every little detail. Herman's exact motivations are left unspoken, as is his psychological mindset. We know he's not right, but we're not exactly sure what's wrong. DuMont does a superb job with the character. Childlike one moment, terrifying the next—but always believable.

Ms. Tomlinson is fascinating to watch in this role. Her portrayal of Rudy is far from the usual horror movie victim. Sure, she cries and acts scared, but as the relationship between Herman and Rudy deepens, Tomlinson goes from vulnerable to vengeful, making it all work. In Tomlinson's hands, Rudy the victim is just as interesting and complex a character as Herman the serial killer. Both actors shine during the wily, cat-and-mouse conversations that fuel the film.

Though dark in nature, *The Cellar Door* is not without a sense of humor. People in the service industry would do well to pay heed to the fate of one particular character, a surly grocery clerk whose words come back to bite her. Also, a couple of door-to-door missionaries end up paying for their pushiness. I'm not one to advocate murder, but if you've ever been trapped by a drive-by minister, you'll agree these two had it coming.

As an independent feature, I'm sure *The Cellar Door* was made for little money, but you can't tell. Everything up on the screen looks and sounds wonderful. Zettell has a great feel for the material. There is definitely a reason this film is getting so much attention. *The Cellar Door* is a smart, well-made thriller in a time when thrillers aren't



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