The Cabin in the Woods

R

95 Minutes

Rating: ***

The Cabin in the Woods isn’t one of the best horror films you’ll ever see, but there aren’t many genre films that are more novel. There are any number of horror movies that are undeniably scarier, or more insightful, or better directed, but at least compared to other films from the last ten years or so, probably none that are more original.

Ironically, the film’s originality actually derives from its awareness of horror stereotypes and its willingness to play around with them. Anyone who has watched a handful of horror films—especially so-called Slasher movies—is familiar with these stereotypes, and will probably bring certain expectations into the cinema with them to watch The Cabin in the Woods. But even as it celebrates these stereotypes, the script (by genre favorites Drew Goddard and Joss Whedon) uses them to invert the audience’s experience. Everything from the cast of characters to the jump scares to the setting and expected resolution are played according to formula—to a point. But then the formula is slowly shot to pieces, exposing several unexpected subplots that turn a very conventional horror movie into something very unique indeed.

The less one knows about the plot going in the better, so I won’t say anything more about the script. The direction and production values are, however, excellent, and the cast (which includes Kristen Connolly, Anne Hutchison, and Chris Hemsworth) is wonderful, and the actors all totally sell out for their roles. The result is that characters that fit all the horror archetypes—the Jock, the Bad Girl, the Nerd, etc—are also believable and distinct individuals with their own personalities. Connolly is especially noteworthy in her portrayal of Dana, the obvious Final Girl, and this could easily be a breakout role for her.

None of which is to say that The Cabin in the Woods is perfect. The big reveal is a shocker but also undercuts any underlying morality the film might pretend to have, if it were trying to do anything but put a novel twist on tired conventions. The dialogue is sometimes a bit too much “on the nose,” as though Whedon and Goddard didn’t always know when to let a train of thought go while they were typing the screenplay. And while the trailer doesn’t really indicate it, the film is as much a comedy as it is horror, and the transition between the two emotional highs isn’t always seamless.

But fans of the horror genre will want to see The Cabin the Woods no matter its weaknesses, because the film is, if nothing else, a strikingly original reinterpretation of a formula that badly needed it. Time will tell if The Cabin in the Woods is really the best horror movie of 2012, but it will almost certainly reign as the year’s most unique genre entry.