

The House with a Clock in Its Walls should click with youngsters

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «««« out of «««««

Running Time: 105 minutes

If you were setting out to make a children's film, director Eli Roth likely wouldn't be the first name you'd think of to helm the feature. Known for horror films like *Cabin Fever*, *Hostel* and *The Green Inferno*, his approach to genre material has always emphasized the most graphic and disturbing elements.

However, parents can breathe a sigh of relief about his latest endeavor. The children's terror tale *The House with a Clock in Its Walls* is relatively reserved in comparison with previous efforts.

Based on the popular 1973 kid's horror novel by John Bellairs, the tale follows the orphaned outcast Lewis Barnavelt (Owen Vaccaro). After the tragic death of his parents, the boy is sent to live with his eccentric uncle Jonathan (Jack Black), who lives in a massive, quirky and somewhat (make that, very) creepy home.

Despite his new guardian's penchant for feeding the boy chocolate chip cookies for dinner, the youngster struggles with the new arrangement as well as fitting in at his new school. As events progress, Lewis finds some distraction in investigating the strange noises occurring within the house during the late-night hours and enjoying the argumentative yet affectionate banter

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between Jonathan and neighbor Mrs. Zimmerman (Cate Blanchett).

It isn't long before Lewis becomes convinced something supernatural is happening in the estate and that his uncle may, in fact, be a warlock.

Oddly enough, things progress at a relatively slow pace early on, emphasizing the mystery of what might be happening in the house.

Ultimately, the villain isn't introduced until the second half of the feature. Some of the jokes are hit and miss. A series of gags involving bodily functions don't really hit the target. However, Uncle Jonathan is an amusing character and appears as confused by the youngster as the stiff and regimented boy is by the adult (who enjoys warbling on the saxophone in the middle of the night).

Much of the interplay and bickering between the uncle and Mrs. Zimmerman is also entertaining.

Perhaps the film's strongest aspect is the production design and photography. The movie looks phenomenal; so much so that it almost doesn't seem to matter if things are moving at a slightly more subdued pace.

Impressive Halloween colors are everywhere inside the house along with the busy set décor. There are so many clocks and strange curios sitting around in the background that there is always something intriguing and fascinating to look at.

And toward the close, as the film really introduces its creepier fantasy elements, it begins to excel.

Obviously, this is where the director's talents are truly visible, and the results are eerie... but not so disturbing as to cause little ones any sleepless nights. Impressive sequences include a

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series of carved pumpkins coming to life and going on the warpath, as well as a roomful of creepy mechanical apparatuses attempting to do very bad things to the heroes. These bits are all so well handled that one wishes there were more even exaggerated monsters.

The House with a Clock in Its Walls has its issues and appears a little too subdued for its own good at times. However, it features a couple of very likable adult stars and has a nice message about accepting your own weird habits. And the film is so wonderful to look at, it makes up for its faults, ultimately establishing an effective sense of mood and foreboding.

Parents won't be bored, and ultimately the movie works well enough to recommend to younger members of the audience. In fact, it may serve kids well as an appropriate introduction to horror films and literature.

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