Not the Mama

A *Other Mommy* Review

By: Adam Dombrow

Spooky season is *finally* upon us, and although, for some of us, it is year-round, for others it only lasts the month of October, so your friendly neighborhood author is here to do my best to ensure that you aren't wasting your time watching subpar horror! First up we have *Other Mommy*!

I haven't read the novel that *Other Mommy* is based on: *Incidents Around the House*, but I have seen it discussed in some of the spooky book groups I am in. The general consensus seems to be a positive one, although I did see some rumblings about how unlikeable the female main character is. The initial trailer for *Other Mommy* provided one of the two best trailer jump scares of the year (the other being the trailer for *Passenger*), so I was pretty hyped up for the film's release; however, the more time went on, and the more trailers that came out, I started getting nervous that *maybe* the trailers were showing *too* much of the movie.

I'm happy to report that, while *those* fears were thankfully unfounded, as there is enough **not** shown in the trailers, the movie itself is just kind of meh for a plethora of *other* reasons.

Let's start, as we always do, with the big positives. First, there are two great performances here: Jessica Chastain (as always), and relative newcomer Arabella Olivia Clark. I'd like to start with Olivia Clark first. We all know how I feel about child actors - they can be super hit or miss. Olivia Clark shows a full range of emotions as the film's central character, Bela. She basically carries the film on her young shoulders, and, if I'm being honest, is far and

away the most likeable character in the movie (something I will address later on). At only ten-years-old, Olivia Clark is already showing range well beyond her years, and deserves a lot of credit for being able to be the emotional center of this film.

Jessica Chastain plays dual roles here, as mother, Ursula, and as the entity known as "Other Mommy". I will say that I do agree with the criticisms of Ursula that fans of the book had - she is a *wholly* unlikeable character, and Chastain nails her coldness. Honestly, it's her turn as "Other Mommy" that really nets Chastain the kudos here: she is full on creepy! Chastain's lingering stares and facial expressions are pure nightmare fuel, and while I did feel that she *almost isn't in enough* of the movie (more on that coming up) she fully dominates the screen while she is "Other Mommy".

This leads us into my biggest criticisms of the film, starting with its characterization. *Other Mommy* wastes **absolutely** no time throwing you right into the story - no set up or anything! The movie comes in at a tight 93 minute runtime, and honestly, it could have used *at least* another ten-to-twenty minutes for exposition. It's actually kind of jarring how little characterization there is in *Other Mommy*: aside from a scene where "Daddo" Russ, Bela's dad, is dancing with her right out of the gate, there is pretty much ***zero*** lead in. The viewer is left to put the pieces together of something being aloof with the family, and while the film makes it *painfully* obvious what it is (it beats you over the head with it, no guess work necessary), it really does a disservice to the rest of the proceedings. Aside from not wanting to see young Bela get hurt, I couldn't have cared less about what happened to either of her parents because the movie does such a poor job making them likable! For horror movies like this–one with what *should feel*

like deep seated emotional trauma–to work, you kind of have to give us characters that we care about, as well as a satisfying redemption arc!

I think the lack of characterization really is indicative of the film's much larger issue: its pacing. *Incidents Around the House* is an almost 400 page novel. and-based on a plot synopsis I read online prior to writing this review–it seems like the movie captured the majority of the book's biggest scenes (we will discuss some of the changes in the **SPOILERS** section), the pacing just makes the movie *feel* completely hollow. I felt like we were just going from place to place, and scene to scene. Don't get me wrong, the scenes *do* feel different, but they just feel empty, and like they really don't accomplish anything.

The emptiness caused by the characterization and the pacing also affect the film's scare factor. There are a few *decent* scares to be had in *Other Mommy*, but really Chastain deserves **all** of the credit for them. The scares really lack significant enough build-up, they are fairly predictable, and maybe the single biggest detriment of all is that a vast majority of the CGI is **baaaad**! *Other Mommy*'s CGI isn't *Evil Dead Burns*' final scene *bad* (that's gotta go down as the absolute ***worst*** of the year, and it really isn't close), but it's just **really** underwhelming. It's unfortunate because I did think there were a few scenes that had *some* cool effects, but overall most of them–and especially the "Other Mommy" entity–are ***huge*** letdowns!

I won't hold the overall look of the CGI against filmmaker Rob Savage *or* cinematographer Lowell Meyer - I truly believe it was neither of their fault. I think Savage did the best with what he was given. I even give Meyer some kudos: a lot of the framing of the

scenes in *Other Mommy*–as well as the set designs–are very disorienting, and almost *nightmare*-like. There are even a couple **stunningly beautiful** scenic shots!

If I had one big gripe with Meyer's cinematography here it would be that he uses this camera inversion technique one too many times; it's cool the first time you see the inversion, but it happens like four or five times throughout the film, and each subsequent try (following the expertly done first one) feels like they are just diminished returns. I will say that Savage and Meyer do their best to try to mask the lackluster CGI by shrouding much of it in darkness, but even *that* couldn't shake how much I felt it looked like something straight out of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, and *that* movie is a year younger than I am!

Overall, I would say that *Other Mommy* won't go down as the ***worst*** horror movie I've seen this year (that title still belongs to *Corporate Retreat)*, but it's definitely near the bottom. If you are a fan of the book (make sure you read the **SPOILERS section**), or you *absolutely must* see *Other Mommy* in a theatrical setting, who am I to argue? For everyone else though, I say this is one flick your spooky season viewings can afford to skip until it hits streaming!

***SPOILER WARNING**: on the next page I will discuss aspects of the film I didn't want to spoil in the initial review, including apparent changes from the book, as well as the ending, so only read on if you have seen the movie, or do not plan to see it, but want to hear more about my thoughts!!!!!

I was completely shocked when I read the *Incidents Around the House* plot synopsis considering how much it appears they changed for *Other Mommy*! Seriously, it sounds like the entire tone of the film's finale was shifted! *Other Mommy* gives us this happy ending, while also *vastly diminishing* the body count from the novel! The "big reveal" of Ursula having been married before, and Bela *not* being Russ' actual daughter remains the same, but everything after plays out completely different: Bela decides to accept Ursula and Russ' love, and continue on "pretending" to be a happy family, shunning and destroying "Other Mommy" in the process.

I kind of lose *more* respect for the movie knowing that the ending is *so different*! I feel like had the movie gone with the book's downer, gut-punch ending, I would have gained a certain new appreciation for it, and come out saying "wow, that was a ballsy ending". Instead, I feel like the happy, "family saves the day" ending we got just further adds to the film's mediocrity.

It's a shame really, because if you fix up the pacing issues, tack on maybe ten-to-twenty more minutes (I think the film running slightly under two hours would have been acceptable) to make us care about *any other* character but Bela, and then just ***floor*** the audience with the book's ending, I *might possibly* have been able to *overlook* the film's trash CGI–or at *least* I would have left the theater thinking about *literally anything* else!