

There are a few basic ingredients to making a Christmas movie; a precocious young star, over-worked parents, drunk and obnoxious relatives, and homicidal gingerbread men. Now, most holiday movies get three out of the four right but *Krampus* does one better with the addition of a creepy, carnivorous Jack In The Box.

Michael Dougherty's latest holiday horror comedy (after the under-seen *Trick R Treat*, the writer/director is becoming a twisted version of Garry Marshall) brings the legend of "Santa's shadow" to the big screen. Traditionally, Krampus followed Saint Nicholas throughout the German countryside taking the children that were naughty while Santa left presents for those that were good – kind of the Joe Pesci to Santa's Bobby DeNiro. Of course, the threat of child abduction by a giant horned demon the night before the birth of the Christ child doesn't quite fit in with the Hallmark holiday and the legend of Krampus slipped away to be forgotten by all but Dwight Schrute.

This version of the Christmas demon doesn't simply follow the Man in Red around doing his dirty work for him but torments and captures those who have lost the spirit of the holiday. In this case, Max (precocious young star played by Emjay Anthony) struggles to keep the holiday spirit alive with his over-worked parents (Adam Scott and Toni Collette) while dealing with the annual holiday visit of his obnoxious, drunk relatives (headed by David Koechner and Allison Tolman). The only source of comfort comes from his elderly Omi (Krista Stadler). As she bakes cookies and helps her grandson wrap presents, she reminds young Max that Santa Claus does exist in that we all have the capability to spread cheer and warmth to those we love.

Not long after that caring and heartfelt scene, shit really goes down. There's a disastrous family dinner that causes Max to tear up his letter to Santa and the next

morning his neighborhood is completely whited out by a blizzard. Subfreezing temperatures and gale-force winds cut out the power and phone services. All the neighbors are out of town already and the family is trapped in their house. Oh, yeah, and giant creepy snowmen begin amassing on their front yard.

Omi is the only one who knows what horror is to come. Keeping the fireplace ablaze she begs everyone not to leave. Of course, being a horror film someone leaves. When Max's older sister (Stefania LaVie Owen) doesn't come back from visiting her boyfriend, Scott and Koechner try to find her but only discover a snow covered Hell of torn apart houses.

One of the strengths of the movie is how the characters react to the craziness around them. No one believes Omi when she tells them of her encounter with Krampus when she was a little girl. Though there are horrific, fantastic creatures attacking them, there is a reality that the film grounds itself in; helped in a large part by Adam Scott's dry line readings. The film's use of practical effects (provided by Peter Jackson's WETA) is fun to watch and lends a gravitas that computer effects would fail at. (Though the gingerbread men battle is truly inspired.)

Most importantly, however, the film doesn't cheat. Everything is laid out on the screen and there isn't any out-of-left-field, magic solution to the ending.

Three and a Half of Five Stars

Michael Dougherty knows the genres that he's mashing together and the audience's expectations for both horror films and holiday family comedies and has fun playing with them. Much like the film's spiritual big brother Joe Dante's *Gremlins*,

Krampus is a messed up holiday classic that is destined to be ran ad nauseam on TBS every December.