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The Awakening

By [Leon Marvell](#) | Wednesday October 24 2012



Once a staple of the Hollywood film industry, ghost stories are now almost as rare as goblin's toes in Tinseltown. Luckily the British film industry has kept the candle burning for the ghost story for many years, most notably with what has become the tradition of the Christmas ghost story on the *beeb*. *The Awakening* is an original contribution to the genre that transcends its budget limitations through a combination of strong storytelling, inventive direction and excellent performances.

The Awakening was written by its director, Nick Murphy, and British spookmeister Stephen Volk, writer of such classic chillers as the television series *Afterlife* and the controversial BBC television Christmas ghost story shocker, *Ghostwatch* (1992). Volk's contribution to the screenplay was the first indication that *The Awakening* would be a cut above the average haunted house story.

The film is set in Britain in 1921, four years after the cessation of hostilities in the Great War, and it essentially explores the 'post traumatic shock' of an entire nation through the redoubtable ghost story trope of a haunted house, and the haunted lives within. In this case the haunted house is a boarding school for boys where a child has been killed. The rector of the school engages the services of a 'ghost hunter' to assure the terrified boys (and teachers) that the death was not supernatural, intending therefore to quash the rumour that a spectral former pupil was responsible for the killing.

The ghost hunter is our central protagonist, Florence, a 'new woman' who has devoted herself, Harry Houdini-style, to the debunking of psychics and their séances that prey upon the hopes and fears of those who have recently lost their loved ones in the war. This is how the film begins: with a séance to contact the recent dead. We witness Florence unmask the subterfuge and parlour tricks of the séance and discover that, as she notes, 'Without science people will believe anything'.

Florence travels to the remote boarding school to investigate the recent death, accompanied by her various scientific instruments required for ghost hunting. The isolated boarding school and its surrounds are suitably gothic, even though the director and designers have cleverly avoided the traditional clichés of the genre. In fact much of the unfolding of the story happens in broad daylight, and it is this studious avoidance of the easy, clichéd path that initially signals Murphy as a director with an assured vision for this film.

Rather surprisingly, Florence solves the crime within the first half hour of the film, and the viewer is then presented with a dilemma: what the hell is going to happen in the rest of the movie? Luckily Murphy and Volk have seeded the first half hour of the film with enough unsolved little mysteries that a great deal happens after the resolution of this particular McGuffin; essentially it is Florence's backstory that provides the key to the mysterious goings-on that occupy the rest of the film.

I cannot of course give any of these goings-on away, as that would not only be quite cruel of me, but also disrespectful to the filmmakers who have clearly gone to a great deal of trouble to craft what is in the end an excellent, insightful ghost story. For this they are to be commended. In an era when 'torture porn' horror films dominate the scene, the making of a fine, traditional ghost story is a courageous move and one to be unequivocally applauded.

Having said that, the film does not entirely work as well as it should. Occasionally the pacing is a bit awkward, the scarifying moments a little overwrought, and the film score a little too triumphant. The score (at least for this reviewer) was a little too over-anxious to amplify the dramatic high points, especially in the 'great revelation' scene at the denouement of the film for example, where the Handel-esque strains of the amassed boys choir almost turned the revelation into a melodrama of absurd proportions. But maybe that's just me: I'm always a little suspicious of film scores that are over-the-top – they may be covering plain bad writing. Luckily *The Awakening* gets away with the melodrama of the final scenes.

The performances are uniformly excellent. Of particular note is the lead actor, Rebecca Hall as Florence, who is entirely convincing throughout, bringing a vivid sense of being emotionally and spiritually wounded to her role. Dominic West is also outstanding in his performance as the boarding school master recently returned from the trenches, tortured by the recent past and haunted by the present. Imelda Staunton as Maud, the stalwart, greying school ma'am, adds decided gravitas to what is in the end the triumvirate of intertwined lives and destinies being played out in *The Awakening*.

The DVD has several worthy extras, all of which give considerable insight into the intentions behind the making of the film. *Behind the Scenes* contains interviews with the lead actors, the director and an executive producer and looks in depth at the writing process, casting and themes of the film. *Anatomy of a Scene* looks in detail at the shooting process of the scene where Florence

almost drowns in the lake; *A Time for Ghosts* examines in depth the era in which the film is set, the period directly following WWI, and includes interviews with a British historian concerning the post-WWI period in Britain and a member of the Ghost Club of Britain; and *Anatomy of a Scream* looks at our fascination with ghost stories. All these extras are worth watching for the insights they provide into the making of film.

Rating: 4 stars out of 5

The Awakening

Director: Nick Murphy

UK, 2011, 107 mins

Madman Entertainment

Rated M

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