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***The Substitute* at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

David Medaris on Sunday 04/06/2008 9:00 am , (8) Recommendations

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There's no substitute for an original idea and inspired execution. Take *The Substitute* (*Vikaren*), the 2007 Danish production that had its Wisconsin premiere Saturday morning at the Orpheum Theater.

The joys of watching this mischievous sci-fi thriller stand in stark contrast to the dull, derivative, overproduced and overwrought cinematic junk food that make up most of what mainstream Hollywood has been churning out in recent years -- all those moronic comedies, inane big-screen remakes of stupid 1970s and '80s TV series, exaggerated gore-fests and all those banal computer-generated extravaganzas that rely on special effects to distract audiences from the poverty of narrative and absence of character development.

The Substitute respects the intelligence of both its audience and its characters. Ole Bornedal and Henrik Prip's script, about a sixth-grade classroom whose students come to realize their substitute teacher is a malevolent alien, is sly, rich in twisted wit and dramatic tension. Director Ole Bornedal has a flair for the subtleties of visual narrative, employing special effects in judicious ways that serve rather than overwhelm the story: He understands that a few special effects can go quite a long way, and in understating them renders these effects all the more effective.

His emphasis on character dynamics is also effective. *The Substitute* is, among other things, a movie about the way kids and adults interact. Here is a classroom full of young students at an age when their personalities are taking distinctive shape. Here are their parents, who ascribe their children's alarm to vivid imaginations. The cast imbues the situation with the warm glow of recognition and believability.

At the center of the film is the substitute, Ulla, played with wicked delight by Paprika Steen. Steen is a marvel in the role, a force of nature in the way only the right actor matched with the part can be -- a memorable symbiosis that renders suspension of disbelief all but effortless. She has such a remarkable talent for subtle facial expression that she conveys a sense of alien thought processes going on behind her human mask. As she plots to whisk her students off to her planet (under the false pretenses of a class trip to Paris) for reasons perhaps best described as nefarious, the kids become ever more desperate to convince their parents -- who, in turn, grow more impatient toward what they believe to be their children's imaginative shenanigans.

The resulting movie is as delicious as a certain bite-sized morsel appears to be to the title character. You'll cringe, you'll laugh out loud, you'll feel empathy for the characters in part because you're bound to recognize aspects of them in yourself. And you'll admire the twisted inventiveness of the filmmakers -- and the Danish film industry that spawned them.

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