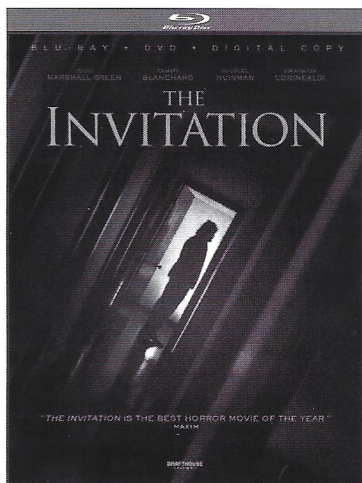


THE INVITATION
 Directed by Karyn Kusama
 (2016) Draffthouse Films Blu-ray / DVD

When Will (Logan Marshall-Green), whose disheveled appearance and thousand-yard stare mark him as one of the walking wounded, receives an elaborately embossed dinner party invitation from his ex-wife Eden, (Tammy Blanchard) he is filled with a sense of foreboding. Driving through the Hollywood hills with his girlfriend Kira (Emayatzy Corinealdi), he recounts how, after some vaguely alluded-to trauma, his wife left him for a man she met in a grief support group, and then mysteriously disappeared for two years. Arriving at the mansion he and Eden once shared, Will is astounded to discover that a group of cherished friends from their past married life have also been invited, presumably to celebrate her sudden return. The unease Will feels in response to this emotionally fraught reunion is exacerbated by the awkwardly forced intimacy of Eden's new husband David (Michiel Huisman) and presence of two strangers, Sadie (Lindsay Burdge), an unstable flower child who seems to be sharing both home and bed with the couple, and Pruitt, (John Carroll Lynch), a bulldog of a man whose calm exterior seems to mask ominous intent. By the time the hosts reveal their true intent—to introduce the group to the tenets of *The Invitation*, a self-help movement promising freedom from depression, guilt, and grief through mystical solidarity with its adherents, Will's discomfort has turned to outright dread, especially when he notices the newly installed bars covering the windows and David's habit of key locking the only visible exit.



Directed by Karyn Kusama, best known to genre fans for *Jennifer's Body*, *The Invitation* is a sterling example of the type of horror cinema that traffics in the tension generated when fear—that gut-level sensation that something is terribly wrong—buts up against one's anxious suppression of any behavior that violates social convention or might “cause a scene.” These “horror shows of manners” are notoriously difficult to pull off, as all of the proceedings must be depicted with a thoroughly convincing adherence to perceived norms of human behavior. The merest hint of cartoonish exaggeration, a single knowing wink to the audience, and what should be an atmosphere of unbearable dread descends into camp satire. Kusama's assured direction of the intelligent and nuanced screenplay by Phil Hay and Matt Manfredi mercilessly imprisons the audience within an atmosphere of suffocating dread without offering the relief of a single jump-scare, shock cut, or abrupt discordant musical cue. To describe the film's first 70 minutes as a slow burn is an understatement, as practically nothing overtly untoward occurs, yet viewers will be hard pressed to avoid the temptation to hit the pause button for a brief respite from the tension that, importantly, stems from numerous opposing forces, dynamics, and aesthetics. The assembled characters must contend, for example, with the reunion of a divorced couple torn apart by trauma, the introduction of Will and Eden's new partners, and their self-imposed determination not to appear judgmental or insensitive even when faced with what, at best, might be described as proselytizing and, at worse, a clumsy attempt at brainwashing. The characters, importantly, are neither reckless nor obtuse. They know full well they are in a strange predicament, yet—completely realistically—reassure themselves through appeals to shared nostalgia and reminders that this is, after all Los Angeles, where the bizarre is commonplace. Tension is also evoked by the film's mise en scène, exemplified by a setting that manages to be both spacious and claustrophobic, and elements such as the recruitment video for *The Invitation* which is simultaneously embarrassingly amateurish and genuinely disturbing. The film's climax offers multiple twists, all of which appear organic rather than imposed, culminating in an ending that is both horrific and tragic.

A good deal of credit for the film's success must go its principal actors. The subgenre, of course, requires a sort of unreliable narrator whose outsider status and questionable mental health keeps viewers guessing as to where the real threat lies. The film is shot entirely from Will's perspective, and Marshall-Green proves adept at garnering viewer sympathy while, at the same time, implanting just enough doubt to keep viewers on edge as they wait to see which path the narrative will eventually follow. Note how, at one point, Will angrily accuses the assembled guests of ignoring the strange goings on because David has plied with expensive wine, oblivious to the fact that his own erratic behavior has been viewed through a similarly charitable lens. Eden is a particularly difficult role to play, as the character, for the majority of the film, is characterized primarily by mawkish devotion to a philosophy she can barely articulate and an obvious air of self-delusion that easily lends itself to caricature. Blanchard expertly anchors her performance in Eden's

underlying reservoir of pain, which proves so profound as to render her sympathetic even in the face of her more grotesque behavior. Lynch has long proven himself a master of affable menace, so it comes as no surprise that he can so skillfully portray Pruitt, that one person you hope never to sit next to at a 12-step meeting. The other characters are more thinly sketched yet still astutely observed, as is evident when the one guest wise enough to bail from the proceedings had formerly been introduced as a successful veteran of the similarly grueling university tenure process. Without calling any significant attention to the fact, the film also repeatedly upends audience expectations with regard to race, gender, and sexual orientation in ways that would be churlish to reveal here.

In keeping with the film's emphasis on the values of interpersonal boundaries, Kusama wisely leaves a number of narrative threads unresolved, providing viewers with only the bare minimum of information required to understand the characters and the nature of their current predicament. This not only fuels audience anxiety, as exposition is the enemy of tension, but proves especially effective in the flashback sequences that reveal the nature of Eden and Will's shared trauma. The film also has the intelligence and confidence to revel in the contradictions it invokes. This is, after all, a film that begins with a justified mercy-killing and then goes on to depict what Kusama describes as an “escalation of awfulness” stemming from the misguided justification of imposing one's agenda on others. The film decries the puerile assumption that pain always must be diffused through unbounded “sharing,” yet also warns against the dangers of emotional isolation. At no point, however do the subtleties overwhelm the narrative proper, and the film works equally well as simply a meticulously crafted—if emotionally draining—thriller.

Draffthouse Film's deluxe presentation features extensive liner notes from Kusama and critic Britt Hayes, a brief “making of” featurette, a trailer, a music video, and, most importantly an audio commentary with Kusama, Hay, and Manfredi. Although at times marred by their odd preoccupation with avoiding spoilers for those watching the film for the first time, the three prove eloquent guides, offering everything from production anecdotes to discussions of the film's visual language and its subtleties. The trio astutely note the irony inherent in a film about devotees of a pain-elimination cult subjecting their gusts to acute social discomfort, an observation that segues into a more serious discussion of the “tyranny of denial.” The commentary also reveals a major deviation from the original script that somehow would have seemed less likely had a woman not been at the helm.

John-Paul Checkett

**LET READERS KNOW WHAT
 GOODIES YOU HAVE FOR SALE
 ADVERTISE IN
 SCREAM!**



**OUR AD
 RATES
 ARE
 SHOCKINGLY
 AFFORDABLE!**

**CALL:
 (570) 592-8125
 or email:
 Screemag@aol.com**