

Things in the Basement

Once upon a time, there was a blonde girl in an alley, and she looked like easy prey for a hungry vampire. But that girl's name was Buffy, and the vampire was *totally wrong*.

Once upon a time, and another time, and another time before that, there was a group of kids, and when they thought they were going to have a nice weekend in a cabin in the woods, they were *totally wrong*.

You know where this is going, if you've ever seen a scary movie or even a preview for one. But the story heads down a different ominous dirt road in *Cabin in the Woods*, which has co-writer, co-producer and *Buffy* mastermind Joss Whedon's fingerprints all over it. This means wisecracks fly faster than fists or weapons, and chances are good a poorly CGled giant reptile will turn up sooner or later. It also means that things are always likely to be much more than they seem, often in a way that melds deep-seated fears with an even deeper understanding of pop culture.

Whedon's co-writer and the film's director, Drew Goddard, also has some experience with mysterious tales; after writing for *Buffy* and *Angel*, he did time on *Lost*, which likewise did some strange things with a seemingly straightforward location. *Scream* is also in the film's family tree, though *Cabin's* view is bigger and broader than that self-aware series. Why are horror stories often so familiar, even as they're built to frighten? What's the point in telling these stories, with these characters (here including Chris Hemsworth as the jock and *Dollhouse's* excellent Fran Kranz as the funny one), over and over again? Where do your nightmares come from, and where do they go when the night's over?

Cabin in the Woods taps into something primal, creepy, funny – and gory. Whedon and Goddard don't slack on the bloody hijinks as they meld horror movie tropes with a smart, perfectly absurd take on the things that make horror stories happen. Is that vague enough? Don't let the spoilers get you, kids. They lurk everywhere. – Molly Templeton



The Truth is Not Nice

Academic satire breathes a fairly rarified air, typically isolated to dodgy second novels or the untenured ravings of drunk grad students. It seems diminishing, then, to classify director Joseph Cedar's brilliant new movie, *Footnote*, as merely a jab at the pretensions of ivory tower intellectuals. Though this nearly perfect film does pick, hilariously, at the itchy nit of alienated highbrows – revealing how the fortress of academia also doubles as emotional hideout – it becomes in the end something more profound than the infinitesimal parody implied by its title. Like all great comedies, from *Don Quixote* to *Annie Hall*, *Footnote* is tragic at heart. Funny, yes, but heart-wrenchingly so.

Eliezer Shkolnik (Shlomo Bar-Aba) is a proud, grouchy philologist whose 20 painstaking years of Talmudic research were suddenly trumped by a colleague's lucky discovery. Eliezer's son, Uriel (Lior Ashkenazi), is an academic all-star, a pompous, self-regarding but ultimately likable professor whose pop ethnographies are scorned as mere Judaic folklore by his scientifically rigorous father. When bitter old Eliezer is mistakenly notified that he's to be awarded the coveted Israel Prize actually meant for Uriel, the fragile bonds of father and son – knotted up by pride, disappointment, envy, anger, resentment and idolization – begin to fray, and the line separating love and betrayal is erased by desperate measures.

It's a juicy premise, and writer/director Cedar lets things run their disastrous course without losing an ounce of empathy for each character drawn into this one family's drama. Compared to the act of dying, comedy indeed might be hard to pull off, but Cedar and his talented ensemble cast make it look easy. *Footnote* has an almost anachronistic feel about it, like some old-school effort from a Golden Age director like Wilder or Sturges; the filmmaking is solid but playful – flashbacks are framed like bits of microfiche – and the story, up to its ambivalent conclusion, maintains an intricate symmetry and equilibrium. As with the excellent later films of Woody Allen (*Deconstructing Harry*, *Match Point*), Cedar's comedy has the force of a well-conceived, immaculately executed short story: snappy, sharp and so much greater than the sum of its parts. – Rick Levin

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