

Us

written by Guest Contributor | April 16, 2019



Us (2019) is the follow up to Jordan Peele's critically acclaimed *Get Out* (2018), a film that managed to surpass expectations and become the highest grossing debut film of all time, and be one of a handful in its genre to be nominated for an Academy Award. *Get Out* managed to start a discussion about race in America because of the film's major themes and plot, and I think many assumed that *Us* would follow suit and act as commentary on another facet of American culture, but it's not clear what that commentary is on.

The film follows Adelaide Wilson, played by Lupita Nyong'o, and her family as they go on vacation to Santa Monica. While there, they encounter a doppelganger of Adelaide who she had run into as a child, Red. Red, also played by Lupita Nyong'o, has a family that mirrors Adelaide's, although they are adorned in red jumpsuits and wield golden shears.

The performances on display by our lead family are captivating with Lupita Nyong'o leading both casts, although her understated performance as Adelaide is overshadowed by her haunting mannerisms as Red: from the raspy voice like that of someone stranded in the desert to liquid smooth movements (such as when she turns her body in a single pivot) that appear as if she's gliding. Unlike most modern horror franchises today that give their villains their own movie, Red is the first character fascinating enough to actually deserve it.

Winston Duke is a lot of fun as Gabe, Adelaide's husband who delivers light quips and a sense of humor that knows when to stay and when to go, never becoming obnoxious or feeling like cheap comedic relief. But just as Lupita Nyong'o's Red is the standout because Adelaide gives her little to work with, the opposite is true of Duke and his doppelganger. Abraham is a stock standard horror villain— a large lumbering brute that doesn't speak— and while actors like Kane Hodder, who played the menacing Jason Voorhees, are able to instill the same kind of menace into their characters as Lupita Nyong'o's quirky Red, all of Winston Duke's effort seems to have gone into Duke.

Sadly the doppelgangers just aren't interesting or, more importantly, scary antagonists. Most takes on doppelgangers chose to portray them as the opposite of their original, but *Us* only amplifies a feature of each character. Adelaide guides her family while Red ruthlessly commands hers; Duke is big, but Abraham is a powerful brute. Shahadi Wright Joseph plays the daughter of Adelaide and Duke, Zora Wilson, whose only defining characteristic is that she doesn't want to run track anymore. So, when it

comes time for Zora's doppelganger, Umbrae, the film simply amplifies the athletic attributes of Zora and comes off goofier than scary with a wide grin plastered on her face. Evan Alex plays Jason Wilson, and the interesting doppelganger Pluto, who wears a mask to cover his burnt face due to his love of fire, but that deformity never goes anywhere interesting.

Jordan Peele displays throughout the film that the impeccable writing of *Get Out* is still present in his second outing. Dialogue is fun and smart with a degree of style that comes out naturally instead of stiff and forced. He lays the work well with his setups in that they return later with satisfying payoffs, however that's not to say that everything in this film is satisfying.

A child wearing a mask in a movie generally means that they are hiding something, such as in the uplifting *Wonder* (2017) where Jacob Tremblay played Auggie, a young boy who wore an astronaut helmet to hide his disfigured face, but in *Us* the mask that Jason Wilson wears doesn't go anywhere interesting. The same goes for Zora Wilson and her pursuit of track and field— it was a note that I waited for the movie to hit, but it never did.

Ironically, on the flip side, the movie gives too much away. Three opening lines of text at the beginning of the film are completely unnecessary and feel like they would be much more at home in a found footage movie where that type of explanation is commonplace. Even the placement of a VHS of the cult classic 1984 film *C.H.U.D.*, a film where subterranean humans rise up to wreak havoc, feels like it gives too much about the plot away to those that know about the film, instead of being a nice nod or homage. Horror classic *The Shining* (1980) never stopped to fully explain what the shining was, what was actually happening to Jack Torrance, or why he appeared in an old photo at the end of the film. Instead, it chose to keep those secrets close to the chest and let avid viewers pick up the clues. Arguably, *The Shining* doesn't give enough away, but it's baffling that even though Jordan Peele lays out enough clues for viewers to put the puzzle together themselves, he also chooses to hand feed the answers.

The final moments of *Us* fill me with all the feelings of watching the film: confusion, disappointment, and bewilderment. Members of the cast give great performances as both good and bad doppelgangers, however poor performances have more to do with a lack of depth in the characters the actors are playing. Instead of the doppelgangers being interesting representations of a person's flawed inner workings, they merely heighten attributes of their original. The film is not scary and does not recapture the tension of *Get Out*, even though it does deliver gore that manages to strike the line between showing enough and being ambiguous. Ambiguity, though, is something that would have drastically improved the film, because it never needed to shove answers down the throat when they were nicely laid out.

Us is a good horror movie, which, depending on how you view horror movies, is worse than being a bad horror movie, because a bad horror movie is often more enjoyable than one that is just good. If a cheap B horror movie attempted this concept, I think it would have been more fun and enjoyable.



Brody Garcia is a film major at Woodbury University pursuing his Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree. A student of film, he enjoys studying the horror genre and seeing as many 'so bad they're good' horror movies as he can. In his spare time he's an aspiring writer, amateur photographer, and always trying to learn something new.