

When a Stranger Calls

“HAVE YOU CHECKED THE CHILDREN?”

With that repeated line of dialogue, audiences seeing *When a Stranger Calls* in 1979 were put on the edge of their seats in one of the most nail-bitingly suspenseful opening scenes ever put on film. Between that film and *Alien*, it was a 1979 double whammy of suspense and chills. Oh, it's easy from today's perspective to sit in judgment and say, “Oh, it's not so scary,” much the same way that kids today seeing *Psycho* don't think that's scary. Why? Because these films have been ripped off so many times, and the envelope they were pushing has now been pushed so much further, that the classic chillers of old look positively quaint today, at least to today's generation of moviegoers, for whom everything needs to be louder, bigger, faster, and in 3-D (for the time being) and in IMAX. The fact that most movies today look and sound exactly the same makes movies like *When a Stranger Calls* even more unique – a truly low-budget film (\$700,000) that came out of nowhere and went on to be an audience and box-office sensation (grossing over \$21 million when that actually meant something). And quaint it wasn't in 1979.

Just reading the comments about this film on the Internet Movie Database will show you what today's generation thinks about older horror films. Interestingly, they seem to have been written from the same book – many of them using exactly the same language to express their displeasure with the middle of the film. They do kind of like the opening and last acts, but what they don't realize is that the middle act is exactly what it needs to be – a breather after the intense opening and a set-up to the intense ending. The other thing these young “critics” don't understand at all is context – how this movie played in a darkened theater thirty-something years ago, with an entire audience squealing and squirming in their seats, screaming out loud, talking back to the screen – but that's the thing about horror films: You can't sit in your movie room at home and ever expect to feel the visceral thrill that these movies had the first time an audience saw them. Because at home the viewer is in control of everything – in the movie theater the viewer is totally not in control. The movie is in control and if the movie is a good one and knows what it's doing, then it can frighten you in ways that a home viewing can never frighten you; it can make you scream out loud, jump out of your seat, put your hands over your eyes or clutch your neighboring viewer's sleeve. You couldn't pause the film or fast-forward, you had to sit there and endure the suspense. The same holds true for comedy films – they can never be as funny at home as they are in a movie theater filled with people – again, shared experience.

When a Stranger Calls is sometimes called one of the first slasher films – only it's not a slasher film at all and there were certainly many that came before – in fact, if you want to talk slashing, *Psycho* would probably be at the top of the list. *When a Stranger Calls* has no slashing – what it has is pure suspense – there is literally no gore, just some blood in a flashback, but you never see any violence committed. Gore is easy – suspense, pure suspense, is hard. *When a Stranger Calls* began life as a short film

called *The Sitter*, directed by Fred Walton. *The Sitter* was basically the first act of *When a Stranger Calls*. After the success of the 1978 John Carpenter film, *Halloween*, it was decided to expand the short film into a feature. The set-up is as simple as can be: A young babysitter (Carol Kane) shows up at an upscale house to babysit two children. She's told by the parents that the two kids are upstairs asleep and that she shouldn't disturb them, since it took a long time to get them to fall asleep. The parents leave the number of the restaurant they're going to. That's it. But we know SOMETHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN because the main title music has put us on edge from the outset – no shrieking strings, just quiet but unsettling music setting the scene. The interesting thing about what follows is that we don't really know anything about the babysitter but we're immediately put on her side and empathetic the first time the phone rings and the caller hangs up, and then calls back and delivers the film's most famous line, “Have you checked the children?”

She gets several more of those creepy calls and the tension mounts with each one. She hears a noise coming from the kitchen, but it turns out to be the refrigerator's icemaker. She finally attempts to get the parents on the phone, but they've left the restaurant (another thing today's generation can't really understand – NO CELL PHONES). She calls the police, but they tell her there's nothing they can really do, unless she can keep the caller on the phone for a minute, in which case they can trace the call. She bolts the front door and waits for the call she knows will be coming. She is able to keep the caller on the phone for awhile, but he realizes what's going on and hangs up. But the police call right back and have been able to trace the call and... well, if you've seen it you know what follows the “and” and if you haven't I shall not spoil it for you. The whole sequence is a textbook on how to build suspense to unbearable levels. After that scene we flash forward seven years, where we find out the caller, who was responsible for ghastly murders, has escaped from the mental institution. The detective from back then decides to find him, and the second act of the film involves that cat and mouse game and features some very suspenseful moments. The final third of the film brings us full circle, when the caller finds the babysitter, who is now married with kids of her own. The finale, contrived as it may be, features one great jump out of your seat moment that's up there with the best of them.

The film was instantly influential and many low-budget copycat films happened for quite some time thereafter, including the same director's sequel, this one for TV, *When a Stranger Calls Again*. It was also remade in 2006, but the remake stretches out the original's opening twenty minutes to feature length – and guess what? It doesn't work.

The leading players all deliver wonderful performances: Carol Kane is completely believable as the terrified babysitter and then the terrified mom; Charles Durning is one of the greatest character actors we've ever had and he turns in his usual wonderful performance; Tony Beckley is not only frightening as the mentally disturbed killer, he's oddly sympathetic, which is always the key to making a

character like this interesting and real (sadly, Beckley passed away right after filming wrapped – cancer – he was in his early 50s); and in brief roles, Coleen Dewhurst is brilliant as a lonely woman, and Rachel Roberts is great in her one-scene role. Director Walton keeps it all moving along and the screenplay gets the job done. But there's one other star of the film that needs to be mentioned, and one who deserves a lion's share of the credit for its success – composer Dana Kaproff.

When a Stranger Calls was Dana Kaproff's second film score – his first was for Bert I. Gordon's *Empire of the Ants* (released by Kritzerland). It is simply unthinkable to imagine this film without his score because his score is as much a leading player as any of its cast. It's relentlessly suspenseful music – there are no pretty themes to lull you and give you security – just dread, pure dread, and then almost psychotic music for those moments when things, well, get out of hand. The score is written for strings, prepared piano, and percussion. Right from the start you are told musically that you should be unsettled – the violins playing a series of notes in unison until the very end of the credits when we get a sustained low note as the babysitter arrives at the front door, and I think we all know that a sustained low note means SOMETHING BAD IS GOING TO HAPPEN. From there the musical screws tighten with each successive phone call, until the music finally lets go as the babysitter tries to escape impending doom. The great thing about how the music is used in this opening sequence is that Kaproff knows exactly when to let silence be musical – it's completely unnerving and keeps the viewer (and listener) totally off-balance. It is a superb genre score and a classic.

After that sequence, the entire next reel of the film plays without music, so that when the music finally makes its reappearance, it begins the audience's unease all over again. From there it's fairly non-stop through to the climax of the film. Listeners will note that one classic recurring motif will seem very familiar – since the idea of it (some would say more than the idea) was used for the classic THX logo music. Kaproff would go on to score a lot of TV and the classic Samuel Fuller film, *The Big Red One*. The fact that he never quite got up there with the more well-known film composers is a shame, because he is a superb composer who really understands film and what the relationship between it and music is. He is, thankfully, still working and making great music for any number of interesting film projects, most recently a new documentary about famed photographer Gregory Crewdson.

This is the world premiere release of the soundtrack to *When a Stranger Calls*. The film, of course, was mono, as is this recording, taken from the original session masters. We present every note of music Kaproff wrote, in film order, as that's the way it plays best – like a symphony of dread and terror. Turn the lights off and listen. “Have you checked the children?”

— Bruce Kimmel