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REVIEW

Film is full of suspense, restless spirits

Creepy thriller *They Wait* playing at WorldFest

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For The Chronicle

Echoes of *The Ring*, *The Grudge* and other recent Japanese horror flicks — and, of course, their Americanized remakes — reverberate throughout *They Wait*, an efficiently creepy Canadian-produced thriller on tap today and Friday at the 2008 WorldFest/Houston International Film Festival.

Director Ernie Barbarash makes judicious use of CGI trickery — in one key scene, he cleverly shocks his audience into laughing — but at heart he's an old-school traditionalist when it comes to scary stuff.

With the invaluable assistance of cinematographer Greg Middleton and composer Hal Beckett, he generates an impressive amount of suspense through the power of suggestion and the evasiveness of editing. (In the world according to *They Wait*, even a teddy bear can appear menacing.) And from time to time, Barbarash simply relies on the cinematic equivalent of sneaking up behind us and shouting "Boo!" Unabashedly shameless — but, more often than not, undeniably effective.

After living in Shanghai for three years, Jason (Terry Chen), a Chinese-Canadian businessman, and Sarah (Jaime King), his ex-journalist wife, return to Vancouver with Sammy (Regan Oey), their young son, for the funeral of Jason's aged uncle, a much-respected community leader.

Unfortunately, the family returns just in time for what some describe as "ghost month" — and others, perhaps more accurately, refer to as "hungry ghost month" — a time when restless spirits walk the earth to take care of unfinished business.

Even more unfortunately, Jason's family has quite a few skeletons in the closet — literally — and a great deal of unfinished business with some very unhappy spirits.

As often happens in movies such as this, Sammy is blessed (or cursed) with the power to see dead people. So is his mom, though it takes her a rather long time to realize that what she is seeing isn't a "waking nightmare," and that a helpful neighborhood apothecary (Henry O) should be trusted when he warns about angry ghosts that evolve into demons when "the realms of the living and the dead intersect."

The payoff has something to do with exploited immigrant workers, and something else to do with illegal animal exports. But these plot elements are mere means to an end. *They Wait* exists only to lull you into an anxious state of dread and keep you that way for, oh, about 89 minutes, without resorting to unduly graphic violence. If you like that sort of thing, this is the sort of thing you'll probably like.