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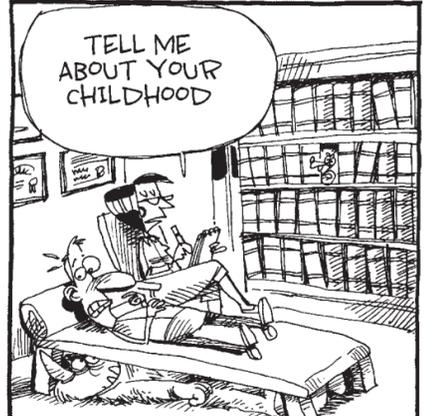
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AT THE MOVIES

Hype justified for the horror hit 'Hereditary'

(AP) -- In Ari Aster's intensely nightmarish feature-film debut "Hereditary," when Annie (Toni Collette), an artist and mother of two teenagers, sneaks out to a grief-support group following the death of her mother, she lies to her husband Steve (Gabriel Byrne) that she's "going to the movies."

A night out with "Hereditary" is many things, but you won't confuse it for an evening of healing and therapy. Aster's film, relentlessly unsettling and pitilessly gripping, was a mid-night sensation at Sundance and ever since has carried with it an ominous air of danger and dread: a movie so horrifying and good that you have to see it, even if you shouldn't want to, even if you might never sleep peacefully again.

The hype is mostly justified. "Hereditary" is a strikingly accomplished debut that heralds the arrival of a new, brashly manipulative filmmaking talent.

Aster's film might be littered with horror clichés — candle-lit séances, creepy attics, satanic symbols, dogs that know something's up — but the frightful power of "Hereditary" comes less from its genre framework than the menacing exactitude of its Greek tragedy tale about the horror of what "runs in the family."

It begins with a succinct three-paragraph newspaper obituary. The 78-year-old mother of Annie has died, and her sudden absence from their mountain home has an eerie if relieving feeling. Annie makes elaborate and autobiographical miniatures (following the obit is a slow shot into one of her dioramas, seamlessly morphing into her son's bedroom) and she'll later recreate the funeral service.

But her mother's passing is complicated. When Annie reluctantly joins the support group, she, in a rush, explains how her mother was manipulative, how she wouldn't let her mom near their first son, Peter (Alex Wolff), but, out of guilt, allowed her to grow close with their now troubled and unnerving 13-year-old daughter Charlie (Milly Shapiro), whom she immediately "sank her claws" into. Dementia, psychosis, suicide and multiple personality disorder are all in the family history, she says.

The mother may be dead, but she

can just as surely control her daughter's life from beyond the grave. Let's just say things start going a tad awry.

The subtext of "Hereditary" — the latest in a run of intelligent and stylish indie horrors — isn't hard to decipher. Nor are many of the frights hard to see coming. What's horrifying, though, is how inexorably they arrive, with the absolutism of genetic destiny. Aster, who also wrote the film, fills his movie with foreshadowing clues that give the gruesome events to come a cruel note of inevitability. There's a curse on this family, whether by ghost or DNA.

They're a vividly drawn family. Charlie sleeps in a treehouse amid birch trees, has a perilous nut allergy, and makes ghoulish arts-and-crafts projects. When a bird flies into her classroom window, she scissors its head off and puts it in her pocket. Peter is more apparently normal: a shaggy-haired stoner with a crush on a pretty girl.

Byrne is, as ever, a figure of reason, resistant to his wife's ever rising paranoia. But this is, overwhelmingly, Collette's film. Much of supernatural flights of "Hereditary" might not have come off without such a formidable actress grounding it. There are other actors who could capture the overwhelming grief and disintegration of Annie, but there might not be another who could also do it with flashes of sarcasm and fury and exasperation. In an increasingly surreal horror movie, she is staggeringly real.

Taking cues from Roman Polanski's "Rosemary's Baby" and Nicholas Roeg's "Don't Look Now," "Hereditary" has you turn over and over questions of what's really happening. Is Annie's mother a supernatural force or is Annie conjuring her own insanity? "Hereditary" loosens its grip on you as it wobbles toward an ending that trades ruthless family dramatics for a more genre-typical occult conclusion. But it's the first time that you can breathe and relax: Oh, right. It's just a movie.

"Hereditary," an A24 release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for "horror violence, disturbing images, language, drug use and brief graphic nudity." Running time: 127 minutes.



CROSSWORDS

ACROSS

- Wane
- Nefertiti's god
- G-men
- Crafty
- Verne captain
- Above
- Yearly (2 wds.)
- TV warrior princess
- Pushes gently
- Sultans' cousins
- Farm team
- Solar plexus
- Waffle
- Cow-headed goddess
- Lillie or Arthur
- Wind indicator
- Gaius' garb
- Sorry!
- Bronco "brake"
- Thing, in law
- Fly catchers
- Oven emanation
- Loafer or mule
- Prefix for "trillion"
- Room dividers
- Druid or shaman
- Put on the block
- Foot pedals
- Icicle site
- Aid in crime
- Drink like Rover
- Brown bird
- Small hill
- Almost-grads

DOWN

- NFL broadcaster
- Moldy cheese
- Polar explorer
- New wings
- Jumpy
- Tall bird
- Alaskan seaport
- Most glamorous
- Turn inside out
- Thick
- Mexican Mrs.
- In a tizzy
- Hosp. scan
- Most genial
- Cinemax rival
- Help-wanted abbr.
- Skip stones
- Kind of jump
- Moon or planet
- Sierra Madre gold
- Rare mineral
- White — ghost
- Puffed up
- Tell a story
- Long fish
- Invade
- Pledge
- Divide equally
- Touche provokers
- Luminary
- Plumbing bends
- Char a steak
- Recipae qtzs.
- Baste
- Sluggers' stat

Answer to Previous Puzzle

WHAM	ABS	SCOW
KAYO	TOE	ERGO
SLED	ROADWORK	
OSIRIS	RICE	
CIA	YEN	
GASUP	PEGGED	
ALUM	DEWS	KIM
DER	CURS	TEND
EFFACE	DUDES	
ACT	BAG	
INIT	DUBBED	
CHALICES	ODES	
DOMAFT	AGUA	
SPED	PTS	TESS

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