

## Paperhouse ★★★½

Year of Release: 1988

Review by Randy Parker

Country: UK

Verdict: See It

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*Paperhouse* is probably one of those movies you've never heard of, which is a shame because it's a gem. The film was released in 1989 to a handful of rave reviews, but it failed to find an audience and quickly disappeared from the theaters. It is now available on videocassette. I rented it expecting a solid little thriller; I did not expect to be swept away—to be deeply moved, disturbed, and frightened. *Paperhouse* was, without question, one of 1989's most striking and haunting films. I'm kicking myself for having missed the movie in the theater where it would have had even greater visual and emotional impact.

The movie (based on the novel *Marianne Dreams* by Catherine Storr) revolves around Anna, a precocious 11-year old played by Charlotte Burke. Anna is a bratty troublemaker, miserable to everyone around her. She gives her teacher hell, she lies, and she is crabby to her mother (Glenn Headly). Then again, Anna has good reason to be bitter: she doesn't get enough attention from her working mother and her father is never around because his job keeps him away from home.

*Paperhouse* begins on Anna's eleventh birthday, and it's not a good one. First she gets detention at school, and then she comes down with a glandular illness and starts running a fever and having fainting spells. Happy birthday! Anna's doctor orders her to stay in bed for at least a week, a fate worth than death for a hyperactive eleven-year-old. Anna fills the time by drawing pictures. In particular, she creates a drawing of a house in a field with a boy looking out the second story window. Then, a strange thing happens: every time Anna sleeps or faints, she has vivid dreams of the house and boy in her drawing. Anna soon discovers that any change she makes to the drawing creates a corresponding change in her dream world.

In her dreams, Anna befriends Marc, the boy in the window, who turns out to be paralyzed from the waist down. The movie really plunges into the twilight zone when Anna discovers that her doctor has a patient named Marc who suffers from cerebral palsy; he is paralyzed from the waist down! In short, Anna knows Marc from her dreams despite having never met him in her wak-

ing life. The film is an eerie love story between a boy and a girl who know each other only in their dreams.

*Paperhouse* is much more sophisticated and provocative than any of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. Director Bernard Rose and screenwriter Matthew Jacobs realize that the most frightening horror lies not in special effects but in the subconscious mind. *Paperhouse* dives into Anna's psyche, exploring, among other things, her resentment toward her father and her budding sexuality. But at the same time, the character of Marc (Elliott Spiers) gives the film a supernatural twist. Marc, like Anna, exists in both the dream world and the real world, which suggests that there is some sort of strange psychic connection between the two, even though they have never met. The filmmakers wisely leave the fantastical elements of the movie unexplained. *Paperhouse* walks a delicate line between psychological drama and supernatural horror. The ending, which easily could have ruined the movie, is strangely satisfying: on one hand, it answers all of our questions—on the other hand, it answers none of them.

Three key ingredients make the movie effective. First and foremost, there is Burke's extraordinary performance as Anna. Although Spiers (as Marc) and Headly (as Anna's mother) are outstanding, *Paperhouse* is really Burke's show. Her acting is invisible, or seamless. That is, we are never conscious of a performance; all we see is a fully realized character. Second, there is the stunning production design which brings Anna's dream world to life. The dream house is dark, dank, and depressing. A sense of dread lurks in the air, and it makes you want to flee. Third, there is the flawless direction by Rose, whose experience as a music video director evidently prepared him well for the visual challenge of making *Paperhouse*, his directorial debut.

*Paperhouse* is hard to shake once it catches you in its grip. It is a truly imaginative creation, and it just may be the scariest film since *The Lady in White*, which is another overlooked treasure also available on home video.