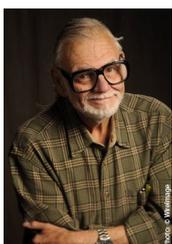




Today, May 28, marks the national theatrical unveiling of writer/director George A. Romero's latest zombiefest, SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD. "National" may be stretching it a bit, though, as SURVIVAL is only playing in 20 theaters or so across the country, quite a step down from Universal's summer launch of LAND OF THE DEAD in 2005 at over 2,000 screens (a record for a Romero film). Then again, if SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD doesn't come to your town today, it will be rolling out in more venues through July 2. Or, you can watch SURVIVAL via video on demand, Amazon, Xbox Live and other digital platforms, where it slipped in a month ago (see listings [here](#)).



When I interviewed Romero a few weeks ago for FANGORIA TV (see our chats listed [here](#)), I asked about this "backwards" release strategy of going home-delivery first before a limited theatrical campaign a month later—a far cry from his studio days—and he remained pragmatic. At least audiences were getting a chance to see his film, and perhaps the VOD would serve as a commercial for the theatrical, he reasoned. During our interview, Romero—oh, forget it...George—came across as the honest, self-effacing and animated person I've always known him to be. His comfort in the hot seat derived from a friendship and respect we share for each other that goes back to 1978, when this then-15-year-old kid met him at a convention for the first time. The following blog presents my favorite Romero recollections and anecdotes.

First, back to that momentous convention, when such events were really fun, celebrities didn't charge \$25 for an autograph (they were free!), trailers were screened on 16mm and you could buy in the dealers' room original Hammer posters (for a few bucks) and not just bad bootlegs of BATTLE ROYALE. So there I was, a high-school teenager, at a Creation comic-book show, where Laurel Entertainment had bought a table to promote their upcoming release of DAWN OF THE DEAD. FANGORIA didn't even exist then, or the Internet, so all I knew about DAWN was that it was a follow-up to NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD, which I had discovered on Sunday late-night TV a few years prior (broadcast by NYC's WABC with disclaimers superimposed over the faux newscast scenes, so as not to create an Orson Welles/WAR OF THE WORLDS-style

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panic!). Anyway, I timidly approached the accountant-looking guy behind the DAWN table, stacked with cheap Xeroxed fliers promoting the sequel, and inquired about DAWN's opening date.

"Why don't you ask the director, George Romero, who's standing right behind you?" the man, who turned out to be producer Richard P. Rubinstein, responded.

And sure enough, as I turned, I was greeted by the bearded, grinning Romero, towering several feet above me. He put me immediately at ease, talked about his movie and signed one of those handouts for me. I had met my first bona fide horror celeb, and if all of them were this nice, this was definitely a business I wanted to be in.



A few months later, buddy Joe Gaudio and I snuck into one of those adults-only showings of DAWN at the old Midway Theater in Forest Hills. Since we were supposed to be at least 18, I recall a feeling of nervousness as the lights went down. Was I old enough to handle my first unrated horror film? Could I take all the unbridled bloodshed? As Sarah Palin says, "You betcha!" A gorehound was born. (Just a few years earlier, the corner candy-store clerk would not sell me a copy of the NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD novelization because he thought I was too young!)

I did not meet George again in person until over a decade later, at which time I was already encamped at FANGORIA. While serving as a producer on the short-lived annual HORROR HALL OF FAME TV special, I took the opportunity to visit the set of the NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD remake, which was shooting outside Pittsburgh in early 1990. Writing and producing the new version, George was not a happy camper when I arrived with our camera crew. There was trouble on the set, and not just conflicts between the producers and novice director Tom Savini. The checks from Cannon Films, who were bankrolling the update, had stopped flowing in. George let it be known that he would not talk to any press until Cannon got their act together. Lucky for me, THE HORROR HALL OF FAME did not fall under this publicity blackout, as I was there to quiz him about the original NIGHT being inducted in the show's first edition. I loved hearing George recount the making of his zombie trailblazer, wonderful anecdotes he'd recall for me many times again in the future, both on stage at Fango cons (especially our national 40th-anniversary NOTLD 2008 tour) and for another TV special, Bravo's 100 SCARIEST

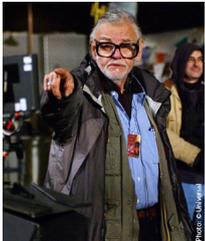
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MOVIE MOMENTS in 2004, where his dog crashed the set during lensing.

Hard to believe now, but there was a time when George A. Romero didn't do many conventions. Now it's the exception when he's not at a con, Fango or otherwise. As a matter of fact, it wasn't until 1998 that George made his New York debut at a FANGORIA Weekend of Horrors event. After driving in from Pittsburgh with his family, he wowed us with his warmth, generosity and humor during his Q&A and endless autograph session. George so appreciated his time pressing the flesh with fans that he turned down his appearance fee! Another memorable con took place in 2002 in Pasadena. With the help of Romero protégé John Harrison (DAWN actor, DAY composer, CREEPSHOW assistant director, etc.), I assembled a top-secret group of George's pals and co-workers (many of whom had moved to LA) for a touching on-stage surprise reunion.



Our paths have continued to cross over the years. I helped host screenings of 2000's BRUISER and 2007's DIARY OF THE DEAD in New York City, and at the latter, George made me feel like a million bucks when he spotted me in the audience of about 1,000 DEADheads and gave me a shout-out. For 2005's LAND OF THE DEAD, FANGORIA presented a one-night-only national digital screening of the film's uncut edition, preceded by an original taped interview between George and me. We shot the piece in his new home city of Toronto, and it turned out to be the most emotional discussion we ever had. You see, George's marriage to actress Christine Forrest had just broken up, he was missing his kids and now living in a different place for the first time in nearly 40 years. The two of us began tearing up as he (Scotch in one hand, cigarette in the other) opened up about his recent travails, which also included the failure of LAND to compete theatrically months earlier in a busy summer marketplace, as well as a grueling overseas publicity tour.

My currently running interview with the indie auteur for Fangoria.com (check out all three parts, and his separate bonus comments on his reported "attachment" to the DEEP RED remake) was a lot lighter than our previous on-camera sit-down, but one sticky topic that I did broach with him was the recent unjustified bashing of his last two films by some disgruntled fans. He takes it all in stride. Problem is, living-dead flicks are the only movies that George and partner/producer Peter Grunwald can easily get financed these days. And now he has to compete with all the other zombie franchises that he himself helped spawn way back in 1968, a cottage industry that shows no signs of abating. Now 70 years old, George told me he has two new DEAD films in the works and no plans of retiring.

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"I think I have a few more in me," the ponytailed filmmaker said, vowing to go out with his boots on. Let's hope, for all of us, that it's more than a few.

*(Be sure to check out FANGORIA #292-293 for more SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD coverage, as well as our review [here](#) .)*

{comments on}