Written by Dave Pace
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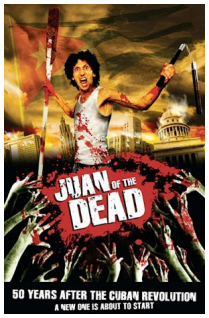
I ventured out to the newly renovated Bloor Hot Docs Cinema* the other night to take in some of the best in genre film with a legion of other people who love these movies as I do. With a lineup of Cuban zombie opus JUAN OF THE DEAD and haunted house chiller THE PACT, we were in for a night indeed.

Throughout JUAN OF THE DEAD I found myself shocked that director Alejandro Brugués is not being “re-educated” in a camp somewhere in Cuba. It may be the most subversive thing to come off the island since Che Guevara, but before we dive into the politics of it, and the reasons I think ultimately the Cuban government allowed the film to be released, let us cover the basics.

JUAN OF THE DEAD follows the tale of consummate slacker/schemer/survivor Juan and his rogues gallery of friends as they navigate their way through the outbreak of a zombie apocalypse. Seeing a means to profit from the disaster, Juan forms a business out of disposing of loved ones who have turned over into mindless flesh eaters. Along the way they discover the situation they are in is declining fast, and their choice to stay and attempt to survive may have been the wrong one.



So does the movie work as a zombie horror/comedy? Yes, indeed it does. I was laughing hysterically at the dialogue and cheering out loud at some truly creative and outrageous zombie

kills (including one that must be seen to be fully believed and appreciated). I wasn't alone either or most of the other guests in the theatre probably would have called an usher to toss me out like some jabbering nut. They were laughing and cheering right along with me, and that is largely because JUAN is a movie full of charm and personality. Juan and his crew are just to the right of Han Solo on the scoundrel scale—which generates some really entertaining circumstances for them to be in—yet they are human enough to retain their charisma. They do some despicable things, but we love them for it and there isn't a mean spirit in the bunch. They are lovable losers just trying to get by and maybe, even a little ahead.

The film delivers some great visuals too, with ambitious scenes of devastation filmed all over Havana. I was surprised at how wide a lot of the photography ended up being and the sense of scale it achieved. The zombies looked great, and again, there are some really hilarious and spectacular kill scenes that elevate JUAN way above the pastiche its title implies.

Ultimately though, it's the heart of the movie I loved. There is a lot of political subtext packed in there, be it personal politics or the politics of the island, and that is what moved me most. Zombie apocalypse staple scenes of the newscasters, who serve that great plot function of telling us and the characters what is going on, treat us to a propaganda show where the zombies are labelled "counter-revolutionaries", "dissidents" and "agents of Yankee Imperialism". It's a running gag and it works really well. Everything is very localized, the jokes are Cuban, their struggles are Cuban and their ultimate outlook is Cuban. There is no real attempt at some kind of bland internationalism, and so we are given a great insight into life on the island.

In the end, the reason I think the Cuban government approved of the film and allowed it to be seen was that it shows not just the real struggles of real Cuban people, but a true national pride. Cuba has been through a lot this century and that casts a long shadow of history over the people of the island. What I saw in JUAN is a pride in your homeland that isn't blind, and isn't some fair-weather relationship – it's about loving your home not because it is the best, not because you are forced to, but simply because it is yours. You can't choose the place of your birth. Instead of crying foul at what some would see as bad luck of the draw, Juan chooses to embrace it and that is real love of your land and culture (if not perhaps the regime) and not the phony patriotism that is so popular in this hemisphere right now.

As a side note, I'm told the film doesn't yet have a Canadian distributor. I hope that someone wise remedies this situation swiftly. JUAN is a hit and has earned a spot among my favourite zombie movies of all time.

Stay tuned for my review of THE PACT, the chilling second act in the Toronto After Dark Summer Screenings package!

Until then, with the weekend coming up why not celebrate in JUAN OF THE DEAD style with my recipe for the perfect Cuba Libre:

• 1 Collins glass

• 2 ounces of your favourite rum

• Ice

• 1 lime wedge

• Mexican Coke. The kind made with real cane sugar, which perversely you have to get as an import from Mexico (which is a really strange political message in itself)

Enjoy it responsibly on a patio somewhere, and spare a thought perhaps for your own home and why it matters to you.

**Readers may be familiar with the former Bloor Cinema and I know many who have a real affection for the place. I know I did and I hadn't been much at all over the years, just a few visits here and there. It had this sleazy majesty, a rundown old joint which was once this opulent movie house. It was the kind of place one could sneak a six pack in and fire up a joint when the lights went down. If you don't get the charms of that kind of place, I probably can't explain it to you, but I think it boils down to a laissez faire comfort and a certain doomed decadence, celebrating a space which was in decline and decay. It was a place with scars and it bore them proudly.*

There was a pedigree here that the new Bloor had to face up to and as I queued up for the first flick of the double bill, I wondered just how clean and safe and corporate the new Bloor was and how much of the vitality was sucked out of it. I'm very pleased to say that the changes have done little to harm the spirit of the space as so much of what made the place memorable remains intact–the majestic balcony, the mezzanine, the reliefs on the walls of the theatre. It's all still there, but now there is wonderfully comfortable new seating , a really nice new box office and concession area and a fresh feeling that might remove a touch of the fun sleaze factor but at least you don't have to peel your feet off the floor anymore. It remains a very worthy home for Toronto After Dark and for that I am thankful.