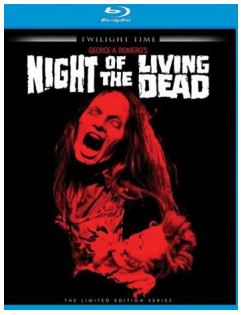
Warning: The review below concerns a product that is, as of this writing, sold out by its distributor (or maybe not… more on that below). NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (1990) was issued this month on Blu-ray disc in a limited run of 3,000 copies by boutique label Twilight Time, almost all of which have been snapped up through mail-order by eager fans. If you feel sore about missing out and are hoping to procure this disc by spelunking the secondary market, please put the credit card down and read this first.

An isolated farmhouse. A disparate band of harried survivors making their last stand. Waves of dumb, hungry and ambulatory corpses crashing up against the walls. The collapse of civility and the threat from within. The plot points of George A. Romero’s original NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD are so ingrained in the legacy of American film that there’s no need to summarize them yet again. A landmark for both horror and independent cinema, NIGHT’s brilliance is that it can be imbibed as a straight-up zombie romp or read as a metaphor for any number of social issues that plagued the era of its release. A color remake in 1990 was hardly necessary, but as directed by FX savant and Romero compadre Tom Savini, this version is easily the least offensive of the various molestations that NIGHT has endured due to its vulnerable copyright situation.



Approved by Uncle George, who also wrote the new screenplay (which is very similar to that of the original film), Savini’s update plays pretty close to home. As a whole, it exemplifies what has become the pattern for almost every horror remake since: For every improvement made, ground is lost elsewhere. Savini’s cast is mostly an upgrade: Script changes allow Patricia Tallman to make for a much more credible and respectable Barbara than Judith O’Dea’s

pathetic, quivering pudding, and HENRY: PORTRAIT OF A SERIAL KILLER’s Tom Towles is plain dastardly as Harry, the film’s heel. A pre-CANDYMAN Tony Todd is adequate as Ben, but hasn’t got a stitch on the late Duane Jones—who else could pull off “heroically bad-ass” while stuck wearing a cardigan for half his scenes? As one should expect from a film under Savini’s stewardship, the detailed and creative zombie makeup by John Vulich and Everett Burrell is spectacular, and given ample time to shine, though Savini does makes the interesting choice to pass on showing much explicit gore.

What’s missing is the incomparably eerie lunarscape generated by the original’s black-and-white presentation—those zombies emerging from the murky void like lost astronauts. The editing of the ’68 version was also much crisper, as Savini leans more toward setting up jump-scares with his staging. This new version also features a revised ending that steers the film into closer alignment with Romero’s overarching theme for his DEAD saga (To paraphrase Walt Kelly’s Pogo, “We have seen the enemy and he is us”), but lacks the impact of the original’s devastating and bravely pessimistic coda.

As for the new disc and HD transfer, the news isn’t good. This reviewer would like to add his voice to the angry chorus of on-line dissent that has risen since this edition arrived in buyers’ mailboxes. For those unaware, the brightly lit daytime scenes at the beginning of the movie have been altered, with a heavy greyish tint overlaid to drain the light from those scenes. This was reportedly done under the supervision of director of photography Frank Prinzi, and the final product has the approval of Savini himself. This release will further agitate debate on the extent of filmmakers’ rights to tweak and adjust their work after it has been released to the public, although this may have been far less of an issue here if the filter job didn’t look so damn hideous. At best, the greying makes the opening scenes look like they belong in the forced gloom of some cheapo torture-porn flick. At worst, the film is obscured, hazy and difficult to follow. (This turns out to be a positive only during the graveyard struggle, when it conceals the hilariously poor mannequin stand-in for Bill Moseley as its head is clattered against a tombstone.)

To keep things in perspective, this blight only defaces the first 20 minutes of the movie. Once the titular night descends on the farmhouse, the transfer becomes quite sharp—but viewers will need to squint their way through those 20 minutes first. As part of Twilight Time’s licensing agreement with Sony/Columbia, extras on the disc are kept to a minimum, with a trailer and Savini’s laid-back commentary ported from the earlier DVD release. There’s also an isolated score track—not much of a bonus, as Paul McCollogh’s music is a forgettable stretch of tuneless keyboard-slapping.

While this disc was declared sold out weeks ago by distributors Screen Archives Entertainment, it was recently announced that a small number of copies had been squirreled away and would be offered for sale at the Screen Archives website tomorrow, October 26 at 4 p.m. EST. This is surely the only remaining chance to get this disc at face value; otherwise, resign yourself to ruthless gouging on eBay or from third-party Amazon sellers. Be advised that neither avenue is worth your sweat or additional dollars. Instead, skip this NOTLD ’90 Blu-ray (or maybe Grey-ray?) and hope for all involved to see the error of their ways and repent by offering fans a better transfer.

MOVIE:

DISC PACKAGE: