

Fango Flashback: "ALONE IN THE DARK" (1982)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
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Not only is the world ALONE IN THE DARK inhabits, fittingly, insane, but it firmly believes so is ours. Twice in Jack Sholder's feature debut, Donald Pleasence's kooky asylum head Dr. Leo Bain makes reference to this. "What do you expect? It's a violent society," he tells Dr. Dan Potter about the past exploits of the "men on the third floor." Later, still defending the murderous psychopaths—even after they've broken out and already killed—he shouts, "Alright they're crazy, isn't everybody?" Once the frenzied picture reaches its incredible, intense final scene, it would really seem so.

After having finally caught up with ALONE IN THE DARK, it's hard to understand why genre fans aren't talking about it more (as in, always). It exists on such a strange wavelength, from its outlook, to its roster of screen legends game for anything, to its fine handling of suspense and grue. The film is a bit of a perfect storm that manages to tackle the age-old idea of the beast and propensity for violence in all of us, and subsequently how we use horror (and punk rock!) to let it out. "It's not just us crazy folk that kill," says Frank Hawkes (Jack Palance). "We all kill, when we must. And we all die, when it's time."

That's not to say the men on the third floor aren't evil bastards. Byron "Preacher" Sutcliff (Martin Landau), Frank Hawkes, Skaggs "The Bleeder" (Phillip Clark) and Fatty (Erland van Lidth) are kept behind electric bars for a reason, one being they nonsensically and communally decide to murder new staff member Dr. Dan Potter, based on no evidence that he killed their old attending psychiatrist. Worth noting in the film's idea that everything about the world is currently unhinged is that while Bleeder and Fatty are simply deplorable in their actions (child molesting and serial killing), Frank and Byron's psychotic rage stem from the lingering effects of war and religion. Of course, Dr. Bain's new age hopes and electricity fail him when the town of Springwood, New Jersey experiences a widespread blackout and the four killers find themselves free to extract unjustified vengeance.



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The film, and Bain's, assertion that *everyone* is psychotic is evident immediately, and the line between sanity and insanity is barely visible. As Dr. Dan arrives at his new job he's unable to tell the receptionist from a patient (who once was a receptionist, thus enacting some sort of therapy. And played by a young Lin Shaye), while her fellow patients roam free about. When Dr. Dan heads on home and into society, he's greeted by the arrival of his sister, who's previously referenced as having periods of feeling unwell, and can be imagined as the reason he went into psychiatry. While Dan's daughter Lyla isn't crazy, she's far from a "normal" child. In fact, she's sardonic, precocious, independent and easily one of the coolest movie daughters going. Detective Ray Curtis (Brent Jennings) who's invited to dine with the Potters later on casually admits his mother hears voices from the TV when it's off. Finally, when the blackout hits, Springwood descends into chaos faster than you can say, "escaped lunatics." The four killers assimilate quite easily into a shopping center full of fires, violence and looters who needed little catalyst other than the lights failing them.

That electricity, which Dr. Bain sees as so integral to his alternative methods, and which mankind pictures as a symbol of advancement, intelligence and progress is indeed a barrier. Once it falls, the crazy, the primal, is coaxed out quickly. The failing of the lights and descent into darkness also kills another barrier and form of release that keeps us and the residents of Springwood sane: entertainment. Dr. Dan and his wife Nell (Deborah Hedwall) are dragged to a punk show by his aforementioned sister (Lee Taylor-Allan). Aunt Toni, in the throes of Manic Panic, takes the couple to see a band called The Sick Fucks. The film catches the band wielding fake axes, belting their hyper-violent anthem, "[Chop up Your Mother](#)", while the slamdancers slam away. It's no coincidence once the punkers lose this invisible line—their darkly humorous release of angst and energy—via electrical failure, the town goes down. The same goes for Aunt Toni's neuroses, which begin to manifest themselves again (and include a Tom Savini-created apparition) when Byron, Frank, Fatty and Bleeder descend upon Dr. Dan's house for the latter half of the film.



This second half, and eventual climax, is a wonderful bit of home invasion with the whole family engaging and unleashing on their tormentors, and talking about taking Valium (a slither of the film's ever-present humor, like the perhaps inadvertent paralleling of the Bleeder and Jason

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Voorhees). It's here, in each subsequent showdown, after an entire film of playing that Palance and Landau get their solo moments to shine. It's a testament to their enduring legacies as total pros (Pleasence, of course, as well) how much of this film works because of their willingness to immerse and create depth within.

The film's most incredible, intense moment though, is saved for the final scene. As Frank Hawkes, the only one left alive of the men on the third floor, gives up his quest upon realizing his previous doctor is alive and well and still cares, leaves the Potter home and finds himself at the punk club. He gets aggro on the doorman—something inappropriately violent for normal society but accepted and championed here—and once inside finds himself an unhinged (probably high) punker who tows the line with him immediately, caressing Frank's handgun. She laughs, he smiles. Is he balanced? No one is.

For more on ALONE IN THE DARK, pick up Fango #317 for an interview with Dr. Dan Potter, actor Dwight Schultz.