Written by Michael Gingold
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The plague is spreading across movie screens again, and Nicolas Cage and CG demons are nowhere in sight. BLACK DEATH, the fourth feature by British director Christopher Smith, is a more thoughtful, powerful and frightening examination of the fear engendered by the titular disease, and the evil it leads men (and women) to do. The medieval horror/adventure is available on VOD this month and opens theatrically March 11 from Magnolia Pictures’ Magnet Releasing division after winning acclaim at fests like Montreal’s Fantasia, where Fango spoke to Smith and one of his producers, Phil Robertson.

The screenplay by WILDERNESS’ Dario Poloni begins with young monk Osmund (Eddie Redmayne) undergoing a religious quandary; while he’s devoted to his calling, he’s also pursuing a romance with a pretty local maiden, and struggling to reconcile his loves for both God and his girlfriend. At the same time, the entire region has been beset by the ravages of the bubonic plague—save for one remote village which is reputed to be free of the disease, with witchcraft or demon worship suspected by a group of mercenary knights led by Ulric (Sean Bean) as the reason. “They believe that the plague has been sent by God,” Smith explains, “so if there’s no plague in this village, it must be Godless.”

Ulric and his men have set out to investigate this situation, and Osmund volunteers to guide them through the swamps to their destination. Both their travels and their experiences once they reach the village will call into question their belief systems as religious men and simply as men—and plunge them into a horrifying struggle between good and evil, the definition of which becomes increasingly fluid as the filmmakers expertly toy with audience sympathies while maintaining an overall sense of dread.

Although this is Smith’s first period story following CREEP, SEVERANCE and TRIANGLE, he

found contemporary resonance in Poloni's script when Robertson and his fellow producers sent it over. "I immediately responded to it, and loved the idea," the director recalls. "I felt I could create a window where we look at the past, but we're thinking of the present. It deals with Christian fundamentalism in a period setting, and with the way the [knights] clash with these people who may or may not be pagans. So it has all these echoes and undertones about today, and I believe it's very relevant. It allows us to look at our Christian past and see how much we've changed—and ask if we have changed. I've always liked in my films to try and get into the minds of the villains a little bit, and play with the idea of who the bad guy is. I've had that in all my movies, including TRIANGLE, which is the most obvious example of 'Am I the bad guy?' "

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