

Written by Kiran Aditham
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Nowadays, we're all accustomed to CGI-heavy epics that overuse modern technology to paint a portrait of ancient times. So for director Dominic (WHITEOUT) Sena, the new Lionsgate supernatural thriller SEASON OF THE WITCH offered a refreshing departure for him to give the audience a glimpse at a tumultuous past.

“I had seen so many films over the last several years having to do with the Dark Ages and Middle Ages,” he says, “and they always seemed to be these big, epic pictures that pitted thousands of CGI warriors against [each other]. One director would have 1,000 CGI warriors, and the next guy would up it to 5,000 [soldiers] and 2,000 CGI ships, and finally Ridley [Scott] peaked with like 100,000 CGI warriors fighting 100,000 others in KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. It got to the point where nobody cares anymore about this. The scope and scale has gotten so big and over-the-top. What intrigued me about SEASON OF THE WITCH was that it was a story about six people.”

Written by virtual newcomer Bragi Schut, the story centers on Behmen (Nicolas Cage) and Felson (Ron Perlman), two 14th-century Crusaders who return home only to find their native land devastated by the Black Plague. To make matters worse, the pair are then ordered by the Church to transport a young girl (Claire Foy), whom they believe to be a witch, to a remote abbey, where monks will perform a ritual in order to rid their homeland of the outbreak. Of course, the task is easier said than done, as Behmen and Felson—who are eventually joined by a priest, a swindler, a knight and a young wannabe knight—encounter harrowing distractions on their journey.

Instead of THE EXORCIST or other modern classics of the occult, Schut looked to even earlier landmarks to draw inspiration for his chiller. “I was watching the Ingmar Bergman film THE SEVENTH SEAL,” he says, “and there’s a scene where some knights pass an accused witch in a wagon, and she’s been tied up and is being taken into some place where they’re going to burn her. In that film, obviously, she’s innocent and very much the victim, and it’s a sad scene where they’ve broken her wrists to prevent her from casting spells. You just feel really horrible for this poor girl who’s heading off to get killed. I remember watching that scene and thinking it would be clever if she really was a witch and she was tricking all of them. That idea stuck with me.”

Terror Tidbits (Fango #292)—“SEASON OF THE WITCH”: Medieval Dead

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For Sena, who counts himself as a huge fan of “road movies” like THE DIRTY DOZEN and Henri-Georges Clouzot’s THE WAGES OF FEAR, it was WITCH’s simple, somewhat similar story that appealed to him most. “I just loved the fact that it flew in the face of every period picture that had come before for years, which were all about huge scale,” he says. “This was really about a handful of people transporting something dangerous across a violent and harrowing landscape. The irony, of course, is that it isn’t what they’re encountering along the way, but the person they’re transporting herself, who turns out to be the most dangerous thing. So those ideas appealed to me.”

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