

Terror Tidbits (Fango #293)—“DEAD” in the West?

Written by Chris Alexander
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There was a time when horror fans had to wait what seemed like eternities for George A. Romero to trot out his legion of ever-evolving, human-flesh-devouring zombies again. Heck, after 1985's splatterific (and only recently revered) *DAY OF THE DEAD*, they had to wring their undead-deprived hands for two decades until, in 2005, Hollywood eventually helped the celebrated filmmaker bring his bigger-budgeted *LAND OF THE DEAD* to light.

But after the release of that uncharacteristically studio-produced fourth in the series (over his four decades behind the lens, the director has almost exclusively remained fiercely independent), Romero—then in his mid-60s—seemed to slip into a kind of cannibal-corpse hyperdrive. Two years later, he scaled down his budget considerably and wrote/directed the almost guerrilla-style mock documentary *DIARY OF THE DEAD*, and now, only two years after that, we find the ghoul master on the cusp of releasing the sixth picture, *SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD* (on VOD this month and in select theaters May 28 from Magnolia Pictures). Perhaps moving to Canada shortly after lensing *LAND* (set in Pittsburgh but shot in Toronto) did something for his mental mojo, because Romero is enjoying something of a career renaissance—and, with several new films in the planning stages and *THE LIVING DEAD*, the first in a series of original zombie novels, set to be unleashed in July by Grand Central Publishing, he seems damn near unstoppable.



And yet, the fun, frothy and blood-filled *SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD* almost never made it into its respective cans.

See, those non-Canadian residents who've heard legends about the ferocity that is the Canadian winter should be well advised to believe the hype. Romero himself could tell you tales: the winter-lensed *LAND* proved a tricky shoot due to the sheer malevolence of the

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elements, as did DIARY. But nothing could have prepared the filmmaker and his crew of otherwise seasoned—and mostly local—SURVIVAL cohorts for the post-October hell that became both their stylistic boon (the film, a thematic riff on the 1958 William Wyler Western THE BIG COUNTRY, has a great, icy, austere look) and their albatross. Battered by wind, crippled by the cold, often drowned out by freezing rain...SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD couldn't be more appropriately named, because its creators barely did.

Let's flash back, then, to late fall/early winter 2008, one of the most wretched and breath-stealing seasons in recent memory. During the stretch that this unprepared and woefully underdressed reporter was scheduled to visit the SURVIVAL set (at this point, the film was still called simply ...OF THE DEAD), the action was to go down in the literal wild west end, just outside city limits in the mostly rural township of Ancaster, Ontario. Driving late at night on a country road, so black that if you turned off your headlights and sat in the dark, your own hand would be seemingly swallowed up by the ebony void, several shivering actors with varying degrees of blue on their faces are converging on a hill-set farm. Thing is, that ghastly complexion isn't the result of Francois (SAW sequels) Dagenais and his intrepid team of makeup men, but rather the effect of the absolute color-draining deep freeze that has the entire production in its death grip.

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