“Welcome to FRIGHT NIGHT.” It’s hard to believe writer/director Tom Holland’s film is 25 years old. And upon learning of DreamWorks’ plans to remake it (with LARS AND THE REAL GIRL’s Craig Gillespie directing Marti Noxon’s script), I decided to revisit the 1985 original and see how it has stood the test of time. My verdict: “You’re *still* cool, Brewster!”

FRIGHT NIGHT is one of those horror films from the ‘80s that you remember with fondness and a silly grin on your face. In a decade in which slashers and splatter flicks dominated the horror scene, FRIGHT NIGHT paid homage to old-school scary movies. As Roddy McDowall’s horror host Peter Vincent so perfectly puts it: “Apparently your generation doesn’t want to see vampire killers anymore, nor vampires either. All they want to see are slashers running around in ski masks, hacking up young virgins.” But FRIGHT NIGHT doesn’t just pay homage to hoary horror. It’s one of the few films to successfully fuse frights with delight, and it predated the self-aware characters seen in SCREAM more than a decade later.

High school student Charley Brewster (William Ragsdale) is making out in his bedroom with his inhibited girlfriend Amy (Amanda Bearse) when he notices a coffin being brought into the house next door. His interest piqued, Charley starts doing some REAR WINDOW spying, and one night sees his new neighbor, Jerry Dandridge (Chris Sarandon), caressing an uncovered and lovely lady. He also sees Jerry’s long, inhuman nails and pointed cuspids. After two women are found murdered (including the aforementioned ungarmented lady) and Charley catches Jerry’s strange “roommate” Billy Cole (Jonathan Stark) taking an awfully heavy trash bag out of the house, Charley tries to convince Amy and his oddball best friend “Evil” Ed (Stephen Geoffreys) that Jerry is a vampire. They don’t believe him, and neither do the cops, who think Charley’s bloodsucker story is crazy. Come on, there’s no such things as vampires.

That’s where Peter Vincent comes in. (No points for guessing which two genre icons McDowall’s character is named after.) The FRIGHT NIGHT THEATRE host and ex-horror star has seen better days. Fired and behind on his rent, the former cinematic vampire killer goes along with Amy and Evil’s offer to humor Charley’s theory and “prove” to him that Jerry is *not* a creature of the night. Hey, Peter could use the 50 bucks. However, when Peter accidentally discovers that Jerry doesn’t have a reflection and is indeed a vampire, the lily-livered host must decide if he’s going to face his fears, confront his cowardice and
really
be a vampire killer and help this kid out.

One thing I’ve learned about revisiting movies that I haven’t seen since I was a kid (I caught FRIGHT NIGHT when I was 11 or so) is that I have an inaccurate sense of their pacing. I found this to be true when I recently rewatched the original CLASH OF THE TITANS. I remember both CLASH and FRIGHT NIGHT being chock full of monsters and action, but the reality is (and this isn’t a bad thing) that each takes a while to get going. FRIGHT NIGHT’s first hour or so doesn’t have much creature action or bloodshed; it’s in the final 40-plus minutes that the movie really shows its fangs and FX. Yes, some of those FX are a little dated nowadays and Jerry’s vampire makeup isn’t that scary, but come on, who can forget the pencil-through-the-hand moment, the long and bizarrely touching werewolf death scene, Billy melting on the staircase and a certain big-mouthed vampire who attacks Charley in the end? And, yes, Jerry is an old-school blood-drinker, not some TWILIGHT model, so of course he turns into a giant bat!

Still, the FX aren’t the main reason why I love FRIGHT NIGHT. It’s the characters. These teens aren’t irritating, offensive assholes whose only qualities are overindulging in sex, drugs and alcohol. They’re likable. Ragsdale (who reprised his role in the inferior sequel) is an earnest, stubborn, curious kid who *truly* believes in vampires. Bearse (of later MARRIED…WITH CHILDREN fame) is a feisty female whose sexuality is released by Jerry’s seductive powers. Geoffreys (who appeared with Bearse in the same year’s comedy FRATERNITY VACATION) also starred as Hoax in the Robert Englund-directed 976-EVIL before entering the gay porn industry (for decorum purposes, I won’t go into those titles…OK, I’ll list one—LATIN CROTCH ROCKETS). The eccentric actor returned to the genre in 2007’s SICK GIRL, and his out-there, peculiar performance as Evil would steal the show if not for McDowall.

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