

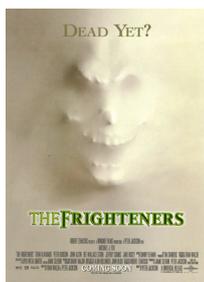
Fango Flashback: “THE FRIGHTENERS”

Written by Eric Mayo

Thursday, 10 May 2012 11:54



I was at a FANGORIA convention a few years back, with guests from THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE: THE BEGINNING there to promote the film and sign autographs. It was nice to see the incredibly hot Dora Baird, but I was there, as I'm sure most of those on line were, to meet R. Lee Ermey. The majority had something FULL METAL JACKET-related for him to sign, but I walked up with the DVD sleeve for THE FRIGHTENERS. I brought up the movie I loved, the one I wanted to be immortalized. The fact that no one else had FRIGHTENERS merch in hand just shows how underappreciated this film is. This must stand no more.



THE FRIGHTENERS was Peter Jackson's first mainstream American movie, the first feature with FX by Jackson's WETA outfit—and it was not met with the most welcoming arms by the moviegoing public. The film was unwisely released in the heat of the summer season (on July 19, 1996) and ended up only making \$16.7 million domestically by the end of its theatrical run, and that is a shame. To recap the plot is almost too difficult without giving up too much detail, but essentially, the main character is Frank Bannister (Michael J. Fox), a lonely man who uses spirits (which he can see since a fatal car crash that killed his wife) to put the “frighteners” on unsuspecting patrons, and then poses as a bio-exorcist of sorts to rid these people of their ghost problem.

THE FRIGHTENERS was truly a revelation and a genuine surprise when I saw it back in '96; I was taken back and in awe from the first frame on. The opening scene in a creepy, dilapidated house, in which the owners, Patricia Bradley and her enigmatic mother, are chased around by a spirit traveling through walls, carpets and even tables, has such a rich and dense atmosphere that you're immediately sucked into the mysterious environment and a tale of

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death, redemption and justice.



The characters are simply one-of-a-kind, whether it be Ermeo essentially reviving his FULL METAL JACKET drill instructor—albeit dead and dwelling in a graveyard—Jake Busey as a full-blown mentally unstable killer from the town's past named Johnnie Bartlett or even the "What?...but it works" casting of Fox as Frank Bannister. This is a scary movie, a special FX extravaganza, a quaint love story, a slasher film, a thriller and any other genre you can think of rolled up into one thrilling package.

The "Death" figure that appears throughout the movie was a revelation in computer FX at the time, as were many of the nifty ghost gags, such as Frank using bug spray on an apparition's face and causing it to deform, or the amazing makeup combined with digital work on the great John Astin as the deteriorating elder-statesman ghost "The Judge." The one character that makes this movie officially awesome is Jeffrey Combs' Milton Dammers, an FBI agent called into town to investigate a series of bizarre heart-attack deaths, who is just as messed up internally (and externally) as the movie he appears in.

Each character, action, detail, movement, plot point, twist and everything around them was designed by a director bursting at the seams with uninhibited creativity. THE FRIGHTENERS has developed a cult following on the home circuit, finally finding the audience that it was meant for. I own the Extended Director's Cut DVD, and couldn't be more proud. I also have the official movie poster hanging on my wall, gleefully displaying the silhouette of a creepy face lurking beneath the white sheen of the paper. THE FRIGHTENERS should be on the top of your list to answer the question "What crazy film do you want to watch tonight?" every time. Deep yet accessible, odd yet familiar, scary yet funny. The DVD is only \$8.11 and the Blu-ray just \$10.95 on Amazon.com right now, so...why are you still reading this?

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