Continuing our conversation with Howard J. and Jonathan Ford, writer/directors of the acclaimed African-set zombie thiller THE DEAD (opening today in select theaters), which we began here …

FANGORIA: Making THE DEAD on African locations turned out to be a nightmare experience…

HOWARD J. FORD: I can’t explain how tough it was to shoot this movie. It took five weeks just to get our equipment into the country, and after the whole cast and crew arrived we were constantly stopped by armed police for money, and held up by so many things you could never plan for. I was mugged at knifepoint on the first day in the city of Ouagadougou, and all my money, credit cards, driving license, everything, was taken from me. Then I was nearly put in jail for driving without the license that had been stolen from me! It became clear that to the locals we looked like a moving cash machine, with our people, equipment, generator, etc. Sometimes we literally would not make it to the location as we would be stopped at gunpoint, for seemingly no reason.

On top of this, when we did finally start shooting, our fantastic lead actor, Rob Freeman from Canada, collapsed with full-blown malaria and very nearly died. He was a really tough guy, a fitness fanatic even, but this little bug put him in hospital for a total of two weeks. He was meant to be in every scene, so you can imagine we were a little restricted at this point. In fact,

all of us became ill, which is perhaps not surprising given some of the locations we had to film in, including real village huts, some of which contained the remains of dead relatives that had been stored in pots. I remember shooting in a dark hut and having giant cockroaches crawling over my hands and up my trousers, and Jon and I would sometimes discuss camera angles in between bouts of projectile vomiting!

We used real voodoo in the film, as we wanted everything to be as authentic as possible, and it took us many days and a lot of complex negotiation to secure a real witch doctor’s outfit and capture the actual spells that are featured in the film. Although I was never allowed to know what was being said, I was told it was strong and powerful and very real.

We also met some real cannibals who told us how they eat people—but only if they’re already dead and not decomposed. One of them stopped by the set and watched our white-eyed zombies pretending to eat human flesh, and they loved what we were doing! I asked my translator to find out if this cannibal had ever tried white meat; he said no but he would love to if he got the chance, then made a local joke while eyeing us up and down. It was getting dark at this point and we were in the middle of nowhere; it was an ominous and uneasy feeling. There was so much horror in making THE DEAD that I’m writing a book about it, covering every single painful incident that happened. Altogether, it was very depressing, and a lot of people wanted to go home, but I was going to return in a body bag before I went back without a film in the can! We carried on, and there were some nice moments too, don’t get me wrong; the cast and crew were on a journey of their own while making this movie, with all its ups and downs.

JONATHAN FORD: We did what we thought was a fantastic Steadicam shoot when Murphy [Freeman] finds the battered truck, and when the roll got back to the lab in England, there was nothing on it—an entire 35mm film roll. Strangely, it was number 13! We then had to go back and reshoot this section, but unfortunately the nearby cornfield had since been cut down, so we had to spend all day planting the corn stalks back in by hand in the searing heat. I myself was then diagnosed with malaria, so I couldn’t lift the Steadicam anymore; we really began to think the shoot was cursed! I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to just go home, but Howard would always talk me out of it, and I’m glad he did. I lost nearly 30 pounds in weight and really didn’t have it to lose to start with; we took loads of pictures on location, of course, but were too scared to show them to our parents because we knew they would worry about how thin we looked. Now, from a distance looking back, I have no real regrets, just amazing and vivid memories.

FANG: Fans of George A. Romero and Lucio Fulci will really appreciate your slow-moving ghouls.

HOWARD: They are the zombies in all the movies we love, and what directly inspired us to make THE DEAD. One important thing is that when you show fast zombies running at you, the scene instantly has to become an action sequence and you loose suspense. Whereas the tension you gain with slower zombies is a much more powerful tool, and ultimately a more satisfying experience. Of course, you can have all the fast cuts when they get right up close and you’re struggling to get out of there, so you get a little bit of everything. Running zombies are the film equivalent of slamming in the meat! There’s no foreplay! Slow-moving zombies are the only way; Jon and I agreed on that before we even put pen to paper on the script. That’s not just because it’s how our inspirations did it, but also because I believe you loose something fundamental with these “running zombies.”

Also, our journey takes place in an area where you cannot hide and you also cannot keep going and going, as you’re short of food and water, and at some point you have to sleep or rest. No matter how slow something is, it will eventually catch up with you and eat you, and that is a scary thing. We didn’t want to falter far from the path of realism; once you’re past the idea of the dead coming back to life, everything had to feel real—no guns with everlasting bullets or characters diving through the air firing double handguns just to get some style, certainly not wearing long coats or dark glasses in slow motion! We find all that stuff cheesy and unrealistic, and it takes you out of reality. We also didn’t want to have 500-year-old zombies coming back from the dead, as we felt the brain and muscle tissue would be too decomposed, and however much we love the look, it was stretching believability just a bit too far. The more recent dead returning to life seemed the logical approach.

JONATHAN: Howard and myself agreed right at the start that our zombies would creep up on their victims rather than run like Olympic athletes, fly, disappear and reappear or some other ridiculous movement. In our film, once you’re with the concept that the dead are coming back to life and searching for human flesh, everything else is gritty and real. Come on! They’re dead! Rigor mortis is setting in! It’s enough to ruin anyone’s chances of a sprinting career.

FANG: Was the social commentary an element you deliberately added to the story?

HOWARD: We were very aware when we decided to set it in Africa that we could make something with a deeper meaning. People are used to certain imagery when thinking about Africa. So when we have a character using a machete against a horde of zombies, what would otherwise just be a gore scene taps into something a lot more powerful, and suddenly it has a much greater impact. There’s also the issue of the spread of disease in Africa; I mean, the infrastructure there means it’s not possible to lock down a city. There are no walls surrounding anything, it’s all open to everyone. So if there was an outbreak of any kind, there would be no way to stop it from spreading rapidly. So yes, it’s a zombie movie and a piece of entertainment, but we also wanted it to have that deeper meaning.

FANG: How did you cast the two lead actors?

HOWARD: Rob Freeman just had the look; you felt he could be this technical wiz but could also take care of himself. I knew instantly we had landed a fantastic headline actor. Murphy was such a physically demanding role, only a few people on this planet could have coped with how traumatic and difficult it was going to be, and Rob was one of the fittest guys I’ve ever met. He was in Brighton, on the south coast of England, to meet with a producer. While there, he happened to meet someone who knew us and we were introduced to him, so we asked him to read our script, he loved it and we also thought he was perfect for the part.

JONATHAN: For the role of the local military man, Sgt. Daniel Dembele, who reluctantly joins Murphy on his survival quest, we were looking for a particular type of African character, one who has had a hard life but is shrewd and clever. Prince David Osei had that earthy, proud, worldly-wise demeanor about him, and was a natural to play Daniel. We found out after we had cast Prince David that he is known in the Ghanaian film industry as “the Tom Cruise of West Africa.”

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