

“THE CRAZIES” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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The remake of THE CRAZIES opens on an apocalyptic setpiece—a small-town main street engulfed in flames—that probably cost more than all of the 1973 George A. Romero film that inspired it. Thankfully, the film that follows makes a case for reworking a low-budget cult fave with a budget that can truly serve the subject matter.

In this case, the subject is a government/military-bred biotoxin that gets into a small community’s drinking water, leading to all kinds of destructive mania. After that introductory conflagration, the movie jumps back two days and introduces us to Ogden Marsh, Iowa—“the friendliest place on Earth”—as Johnny Cash’s cover of “We’ll Meet Again” plays on the soundtrack. (After “The Man Comes Around” in Zack Snyder’s DAWN OF THE DEAD and this, Cash has apparently become the unlikely go-to guy for Romero-remake theme songs.) This burg is so bucolic that it’s unlikely Sheriff David Dutton (Timothy Olyphant) and his deputy, Russell (Joe Anderson), have much to do on a typical day. That all changes when a local man strides onto the diamond during a high-school baseball game, toting a loaded shotgun.



Things get worse fast following the confrontation between this guy and David, whose doctor wife Judy (Radha Mitchell) sends home another Ogden Marsh resident with what appears to be a minor illness, only for him to engage in a shocking act of violence that night. They don’t happen *too* fast, though, but with just the right, brisk pacing thanks to a tight script by Scott Kosar and Ray Wright and equally efficient direction by Breck Eisner. We follow along with our protagonists as they swiftly realize, and are then directly threatened by, the wave of violence that begins to engulf the town. The protagonists are sharp enough to figure out what’s going on quickly, and dramatically (one shot revealing the specific source of the madness is a knockout), with a minimum of filler moments to artificially draw out the tension. The one exception is an unnecessary bit borrowing from JAWS in which David visits Ogden Marsh’s mayor (John Aylward), and implores him unsuccessfully to turn off Ogden Marsh’s water supply. David soon

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shuts it down himself, but by then, of course, it's too late.

Just as in Romero's film, the danger posed by the crazed, infected townsfolk is soon usurped by that of the squads of soldiers who swoop in to contain the mess, quarantine the area and, inevitably, take out anyone perceived as a threat. Unlike the '73 movie, however, this CRAZIES doesn't spend much time on debates between the Army men; they're mostly gas-masked goons representing the popular cinematic perception of the government/military complex as a faceless threat. (Not for nothing was this film co-produced by Participant Media, an outfit devoted to politically conscious cinema.) Instead, once David escapes from a distant encampment, returns—with rather implausible speed and ease—to Ogden Marsh and rescues Judy, THE CRAZIES becomes a survival quest in which the Duttens, Russell and teenager Becca (Danielle Panabaker) try to reach safety, dodging both soldiers and their homicidal former neighbors.

The last hour of THE CRAZIES is more episodic and thus carries a little less tension than the knockout first 35 minutes or so, though there is the ongoing question of whether the increasingly trigger-happy Russell is succumbing to the illness or just the pressure of their predicament. As such, he's the most complex character on view here; the other three leads are a little more cut-and-dried, albeit all well-acted. Olyphant, who has more often been seen playing parts like Russell, quite well embodies the traditional stand-up hero battling a danger unleashed by his own country, and Mitchell and Panabaker create sympathetic heroines, with Judy being pregnant to add to the urgency. Eisner and cinematographer Maxime Alexandre (who previously shot Alexandre Aja's HIGH TENSION and THE HILLS HAVE EYES, among others) create a sense of visual menace even in the sunny, down-home early sequences, and Eisner stages setpieces of shocking mayhem, bolstered by icky makeup FX by Robert Hall and Almost Human, that occasionally, and effectively, go over the top into giggly black humor. Mark Isham's music, on the other hand, is overemphatic as often as not.

On balance, however, this is a horror remake done right, one that respects what made the original work while striking out in new directions—but not so far that it betrays the source. This CRAZIES has more scale and explosions than Romero presented, but it nonetheless keeps its focus tight on its small group of survivors and, to the end, maintains an emphasis on brutal, close-quarters mayhem. It's a remake that stands on its own—and apparently the filmmakers think so, having awarded Romero an executive-producer credit in lieu of a “Based on...” acknowledgment.

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