Way back in 1962, the year he warned America that Medicare would lead to socialism and the destruction of American democracy, Ronald Reagan switched political parties and famously said, “I didn’t leave the Democratic party; my party left me.” Five years later, in 1967, the former B-movie actor become governor of California; one year after that, in 1968, George A. Romero’s NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD was released and changed the face of modern horror cinema forever.

Reagan’s eventual ultra-conservative eight-year reign as President of the United States (beginning in 1981) attempted to plunge America into some dark, idiotic void of 1950s-era optimism that ignored poor people and AIDS and made greed good. And as if to welcome Reagan into office, in 1979 Romero stared hard into the eyes of the horror of the times and everyday life, and came away with a darkly pessimistic, brutally honest and often hilarious view of the human condition called DAWN OF THE DEAD.

Okay, so what does *any* of this have to do with my review of Romero’s latest zombie movie, SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD? Well, ladies and gentlemen, I’m here to say that Romero hasn’t left the horror genre; the genre has left him. Or perhaps I should say, the fan base that makes up his chosen genre. Because there’s really no other explanation for the reactions I’ve heard, expressed by friends in person and strangers on-line, about Romero’s latest examination of the societal breakdown that occurs when the dead start feeding on the living.

Like it or not—and yes, I do like it quite a bit—SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD continues the long-established tradition of mixing social commentary, zombie mayhem, goofball humor and melodrama that has been Romero’s stock in trade since DAWN OF THE DEAD. Everyone loves DAWN because of the swipes at rampant consumerism, the exploding head, the zombie pie

fight and its disparate group of characters learning to work together to almost survive. But it seems to me, based on discussions, that people dislike SURVIVAL quite a bit even though it contains a swipe at humanity’s fundamental resistance to change, a ghoul getting its head blown up with a fire extinguisher, zombie-vs.-fisherman comedy and a disparate group of characters learning to work together to almost survive.

Just to be clear, as much as I love Romero’s movies, I’m not slavishly blind either. BRUISER didn’t do a whole lot for me, and I actively hate a good deal of DIARY OF THE DEAD despite admiring him for trying something very different as a filmmaker. Even though DIARY is a failure, it’s an interesting experiment that fails aspiring to a higher level than a lot of good films ever attempt.

I guess I’m just getting old, but it’s hard to have serious discussions with folks who describe the plague of various horror remakes as “Awesome!” and then decry the decline of Romero as a filmmaker because his latest movie has (gasp!) “bad comedy” elements. Please refer back to that zombie pie fight in DAWN OF THE DEAD that everyone seems to love to better understand my reference to the Reagan quote and my own frustration with discussing this subject amongst fellow fans.

Fanboys are often their own worst enemies. I remember talking to people who skipped LAND OF THE DEAD in theaters, as they wanted to wait for the inevitably gorier video release—as if the bloodshed was the only reason to see a Romero film. So instead of helping out the man who has given us numerous classics and insuring he could get access to enough money to make another project closer to his heart, LAND bombed and he was stuck making the only movies he can get money for anymore: zombie films. Then, the same idiots who let LAND die at the box office eventually bought the uncut DVD (or downloaded it from a torrent to really add insult to injury), drooled over the extra 30 seconds of gore and bemoaned the fact that Romero’s best days are behind him and all he can do anymore is make crappy zombie movies.

“I man, jeez, isn’t George Romero as sick of making zombie films as I am of downloading them?”

But thankfully, Romero appears to be ignoring these people now and making movies to satisfy himself—and the rest of us who like to watch him stretch his filmmaking legs. Which, I’m pleased to say, leads us into his latest almost-classic, SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD, now out on single DVD and double-DVD/Blu-ray Ultimate Undead Editions from Magnolia Home

Entertainment.

SURVIVAL depicts the adventures of Sarge (played by Alan Van Sprang, who had a memorable scene in DIARY that’s referenced early on in this film for those who might have forgotten) and his soldier cohorts, who get caught in the middle of a feud between two families on an island off the coast of Delaware (which has apparently been co-opted by Ireland). The O’Flynn clan (led by Patrick, played by Kenneth Welsh) believe that the newly rising and hungry dead need to be destroyed, while the Muldoon family (led by Seamus, played by Richard Fitzpatrick) wants to segregate and nurture the undead until a cure can be found for what ails them. And while there are always ghouls somewhere around the edges of the frame, the main story concerns the clash between the families’ beliefs, and what each side needs to do in order to cope with the horror that surrounds—but hopefully won’t engulf—them.

The budget is a bit tight on this one, but I for one found that it brought Romero back to his primal filmmaking style that I prefer. No fancy dolly or crane shots, just the simple character geography that lets decisions get made in the editing room—it harks back to the charcoal-sketch filmmaking simplicity of classics like MARTIN or THE CRAZIES. With the exception of a few camera moves, this one really feels like a comic book come to life. It’s well-shot, has a better score than a Romero film has had in far too long (am I the only one who misses John Harrison as a composer?), and who but Uncle George would have the audacity to put a zombie on horseback and make it work as a haunting image? Strangest of all, considering all the comedic asides, this is pretty dark and pessimistic material.

Romero freely admits that SURVIVAL is his take on the classic Western THE BIG COUNTRY, and to his credit, unlike most modern horror filmmaker wannabes, he’s not afraid to talk about the movies that inspired his current work. He knows that a real artist absorbs the work of others and transforms it into something personal and different from the source materials. Sadly, most of the sorry bastards creating genre cinema today don’t have that ability, so they simply remake the movies they loved (or have been hired to puree for modern consumption) instead of taking the similar route of soulful filtering. But I guess box-office receipts support the fact that this is what modern ticket buyers deserve, when remakes of THE CRAZIES and DAWN rake in the big bucks on opening weekend, while the father of both titles is reduced to having his biggest-budgeted zombie film (LAND) dumped by its studio into the midst of brutal summer competition (because what studio would be stupid enough to release a horror film at Halloween?) to drop dead on arrival before a fickle public.

Back once again to SURVIVAL. Yeah, not all of it works. While the two lead island antagonists are great, compelling characters who are very ably performed, some of the supporting roles are

not as well-played and the characters themselves not as complex or interesting. A few plot points get muddled (*twins?!*) and the zombies feel less like the supporting characters they should be than a plot device shoehorned into a off-kilter Western (OK, I actually kinda like that). There are also a couple of *terrible* CGI gore FX (gads, those heads on the poles…!), but not all of them are bad.

SURVIVAL was shot on hi-def video, and shot well; it has a dusty, organic look with muted colors that fits the proto-Western milieu it tries to emulate once the characters reach Plum Island. Which means it looks great in the discs’ widescreen transfers, and as you’d expect, the soundtracks are up to the usual horror-film standards, with well-chosen silences that leave room for the occasional dimensional shock sound (although, as it’s a Romero film, thankfully nothing too cheap in the jump-scare category of sound FX bullshit). The supplemental fun begins with a brief behind-the-scenes promo for AMC’s upcoming THE WALKING DEAD before the viewer is given the option of Zombie or Human menus to choose from.

The audio commentary by Romero and a number of his fellow SURVIVALists is a bit of a disappointment, considering the number of participants involved and that the director is usually full of stories once he starts talking. Here, too many people step on what each other has to say, and confusion quickly sets in. The most interesting aspect is the fact that some of these people are seeing the final version of the movie for the first time while watching. The opening scene, for example, was added during a period of reshoots at the end of the schedule, so there are genuine yelps of surprise from these folks when they see what happens. Stuff like this happens a few times during the discussion and sheds some light onto the production, but these moments are rare, and having a moderator would have been extremely helpful, as the most fruitful moments are those when someone asks Romero a direct question and he simply answers it.

There are two HDNet video presentations, one of which is a goofy video introduction to SURVIVAL’s airing on the network, in which Romero yuks it up for the camera with a bunch of zombies playing the crewmembers shooting the promo. A slightly longer HDNet making-of promo contains little in the way of insight, but works hard to sell the comedy schtick in the movie rather than the horror elements (and makes judicious use of the previously mentioned Romero-with-zombies footage as scene bumpers).

A 10-minute video of Uncle George kicking back on a couch with what appears to be a drink or two in him is one of the highlights among the extras. Here, sitting comfortably with his hands wrapped behind his head, Romero talks about the legal issues behind using continuing characters in his zombie movies and a few other details of great interest to fans. It’s personable, no-bullshit talking, and makes you feel like he’s sitting right next to you and telling it straight.

The supplemental highpoint, however, is Michael Felsher’s 76-minute documentary WALKING AFTER MIDNIGHT, a fanboy wet dream come true that is both wholly informative and emotionally effective. In the spirit of full disclosure, I must admit knowing and having worked with Felsher, and I can tell you that what you see on screen is not a fabricated personality trying to connect with the Romero fan base, but an honest-to-goodness one-of-us guy who is capable of being a professional documentary filmmaker while also maintaining that gee-whiz fan mentality that allows him to be the happiest fellow alive when covered in Karo-syrup blood at 3 a.m. while outdoors in the coldest winter in Canadian memory. And yeah, I’m not afraid to say I’m jealous of the lucky sonofabitch.

Felsher perfectly captures the spirit of being on a film set: the daily problems that must be solved; how even the most mundane onscreen detail must be taken care of in advance by a talented crew working together to create a movie. Felsher is not treated like a visiting documentarian held a respectable arm’s-length away by the moviemakers, but is by now a member of the extended Romero filmmaking family and is given 100 percent access to whatever is going down on set. Whether he’s hanging out with Romero, fellow zombie extras, the lead actors or the technical crew, Felsher and his camera are almost always where you’d want to be, capturing the kind of great behind-the-scenes details most journalists have become inured to and routinely ignore.

A short fiction film also directed by Felsher, entitled SARGE (with Van Sprang reprising the role), is a bit disappointing. There’s not anything particularly wrong with it, it just feels redundant as it reiterates plot points while the character explains himself and what’s happening—but doesn’t add anything new to the equation. It feels more like a kind of teaser trailer than an independent movie that stands on its own. Well-shot, well-acted and running under five minutes (so it’s short enough to not be boring), it has to be judged as a well-made good idea, but one that falls short of the mark.

There are also 13 brief clips that fall under the banner of “A Minute of Your Time,” capturing various behind-the-scenes moments in the manner of making-of haikus, if you will. The drive out to location in real time, the loading of a dummy with blood and hair before it’s blown up, the stuffing of a (thankfully fake) dead horse belly with plenty of guts and the door-slamming of a zombie head are among the moments observed from a Zen-like, quiet distance by the camera. Also present here are some brief, enjoyable interview snippets that didn’t make the final cut of the main documentary. The final bits include a two-minute storyboard-to-movie comparison of the aforementioned zombie-heads-on-pikes sequence (jeez, maybe they just should have shot that entire bit from *behind* the heads only, as those shots are much more impactful) and a 10 minute IndyMogul segment that shows you how to craft cheap zombie-bite makeup FX

(featuring an appearance by good sport Romero).

So the good news is that as a filmmaker, George A. Romero (unlike Ronald Reagan) is still alive and kicking; and more importantly, he has made another zombie movie that’s worth seeing and talking about. There’s much to admire in SURVIVAL—including a final image that alone is almost worth the price, as it bridges the gap between the pop-artist who makes zombie films and the comic-book-influenced director who made CREEPSHOW. To those who didn’t like the film—fine by me; that’s what opinions are all about. But I do ask that you judge the film on its own merits and how it fits into the overall Romero *oeuvre* before outright dismissing it as a late-career near-miss by an old man who’s almost out of the game. You’d be doing both yourself and the movie a great disservice.

MOVIE:

DISC PACKAGE:

{jcomments on}