

## “BRAIN DEAD” (DVD Review)

Written by Pat Jankiewicz

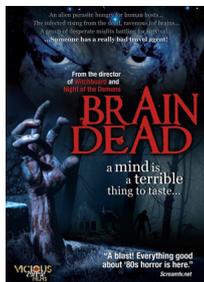
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BRAIN DEAD, now on DVD from Vicious Circle/Breaking Glass, is a welcome blast of '80s-style goofiness and gore. That's because it comes from one of the specialists of the genre, director Kevin Tenney.

Two decades back, Tenney was one of a group of creative, off-the-beaten-path exploitation filmmakers who made bizarre, non-studio “Where the hell did that come from?” movies like, in his case, the wacky WITCHBOARD and his greatest work, the odd, cool and recently remade NIGHT OF THE DEMONS. In the two decades since, Tenney has not lost a step, delivering a fast, fun horror movie with catfights, gunfights, gross-outs and copious female nudity (with 99 percent of the female characters getting naked, only one of them wears a bra). He even includes the kind of ironic coda he's used in past features like DEMONS.



With a storyline involving cannibalistic, brain-eating monsters, falling meteors, parasites, escaped convicts, hillbilly deputies and plucky lesbians, BRAIN DEAD feels like five short stories from Stephen King's NIGHT SHIFT crammed into one movie. Screenwriter Dale Gelineau keeps the quips flying as fast as the splatter and homages everything from NIGHT OF THE CREEPS to drive-in movie critic Joe Bob Briggs (“If you know what I mean and I think you do!”). Gabe Bartalos' great makeup FX have an appealing old-school, pre-CGI feel to them, and the man who has contributed to everything from Frank Henenlotter's BASKET CASE movies to Roland Emmerich's GODZILLA seems to relish going gory. Watching a fist punch out a brain with no sign of digital trickery is surprisingly fun, though Bartalos' shining moment is a truly revolting third-act pregnancy—a gooey, gross gag that tries to outdo James Gunn's own '80s-horror homage SLITHER. (Watch for Bartalos and Tenney as fishermen during the closing credits, as well as fellow veteran exploitationeer Jim Wynorski as the sheriff.)

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Michelle Tomlinson is a cast standout as tough-but-cute lesbian Claudia, who beats the audience to the punch when she screams, “What the f\*\*k just happened?!” Her quirky character becomes an audience surrogate and an important source of exposition. The wisecracking, sexy Claudia and her girlfriend Sherry (Sarah Grant Brendecke, also funny) reveal themselves to be molecular biologists who manage to credibly explain the movie’s alien, which looks loosely based on Spider-Man’s enemy Venom. It’s fun to see these girls filling the bill of both ingenues and know-it-all scientists—though the movie doesn’t explain how these super-smart women can’t read a map!

BRAIN DEAD was originally shot in 2006, but aside from a reference to 60 MINUTES’ Ed Bradley (who died that year), it could have been made yesterday. BRAIN DEAD (the third movie in the past two decades with that title, after the Peter Jackson splatterfest a.k.a. DEAD ALIVE and one by Adam Simon) is a fun throwback to anything-goes ’80s horror, in which Tenney easily recreates the funny/shocking tone of DEMONS; it’s good to have the guy back in the genre.

The DVD extras are plentiful, and include trailers for this film and other low-budget horrors and the terrific “BRAIN DEAD: Behind the Screams” documentary. It covers everything from location scouting to auditions to Bartalos’ FX work and much more, and even includes a cameo by our own Tony Timpone. Outtakes and bloopers are dominated by Cristina Tiberius (who enters smoking a cigarette, announcing she’s back “from the best zombie sex I ever had!”) and Tomlinson, who breaks character at one point to tell a brain-eating zombie, “Get out of my house, bitch!” We learn one of the characters is driving producer Greg McKay’s BMW in a commentary by Tenney, Bartalos and the cast, on which the director and Tomlinson are especially funny. Tenney is refreshingly honest, calling BRAIN DEAD “a steaming pile of art” and revealing that he originally had its characters being chased by a giant spider, which he quickly realized he could not afford—so he went with zombies because they were cheaper!

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