

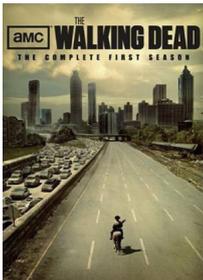
“THE WALKING DEAD: The Complete First Season” (DVD Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
Tuesday, 08 March 2011 09:54



It's kind of amazing that in 2010, years after the zombie craze reignited—and oversaturation had long been an issue—audiences received one of the most refreshing and exciting undead tales yet. But on the same note, and possibly because of its mostly stellar quality, it didn't take much to get caught up in the whirlwind of excitement surrounding THE WALKING DEAD when it first aired. This week's release of its initial season on DVD and Blu-ray by Anchor Bay offers the chance to reevaluate the first six episodes in hopes they measure up to just how excellent most thought they were.

“Days Gone By,” the 90-minute premiere pilot of THE WALKING DEAD, is a great piece of television (see full review [here](#)), one that promised an equally great series. That which followed was a captivating, often excellent saga that also had its share of missteps along the way, some of which prevented it from being wholly classic.



Adapted from Robert Kirkman's comics series, THE WALKING DEAD follows officer Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) as he awakens from a gunshot-induced coma to find a changed world, one that has been ravaged by zombies. Through tenacity and will to survive, he's able to find his family (wife Lori, played by Sarah Wayne Callies, and son Carl, played by Chandler Riggs) in a makeshift survivors' camp, where, along with its small population, he does his best to keep living despite ghoulish attacks and simmering personal tensions.

With exciting diversions and improvements over the already solid comics, Frank Darabont and his incredible team of writers, directors and cast shepherded a horror series rife with both beautiful character moments and stunning makeup FX. In “Days Gone By,” the characters of Morgan (Lennie James) and his son Duane (Adrian Kali Turner) were greatly expanded from helpful bit characters to a strong combined emotional center, setting a tone for the genuine empathy and often heartwrenching moments on display throughout the show, in both human and undead terms. The welcome additions of Michael Rooker and Norman Reedus as Merle and Dale Dixon were also an exciting source of tension and an emphatic reminder of the world's often moral gray area following its collapse. The series' greatest improvement on the

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comics—the treatment of Rick’s partner Shane (Jon Bernthal), who saved Lori and Carl and has since taken up with Lori—also ended up being one of greatest faults, however.

Darabont and Bernthal, in the season’s first half, crafted a three-dimensional and complex character out of Kirkman’s Shane, a black-and-white douchebag who quickly escalated to hysterics upon Rick’s return. Instead, in episodes three and four, Shane becomes a man who is obviously deeply hurt by the loss of the surrogate family and position of leadership he achieved after the outbreak, and although many of his extreme choices were direct results and expressions of his inner turmoil (like beating abusive husband Ed to a literal pulp), he was often right as well. By episodes five and six, however, the hard work put in by the show’s creative team started to falter, and the comics Shane spills out as he indulges in questionable and often unredeemable acts that push him toward being not only a clearcut bad guy (aiming his rifle at a far-off Rick, drunkenly attacking Lori), but a bit cartoonish as well. He may be silently suffering, but his escalation of sheer awful behavior seems incongruous and hasty for a show so clearly taking its time.

THE WALKING DEAD’s other major misstep was season finale “TS-19,” which saw the series attempt to go a bit too big for its climax. As the main ensemble reaches the Center for Disease Control, they’re confronted with a scientist (Noah Emmerich) who may have some answers, but who has also made a finite decision. This episode contains some highs, such as the folks we’ve followed gaining some much-needed reprieve in food, drink and showers, but they’re also undercut by a number of more obvious moments. The shower montage, for instance, sees the likes of Shane and Andrea dealing with their guilt and grief, but they’re obvious and fairly clichéd moments. The big finish also arrives a bit quickly and might have been better served as a small cliffhanger wrapped up in the early part of the forthcoming season two, so that the audience would be left with a sense of nervous danger, rather than the aimless “What’s next?” (although there’s no doubt there is an aim).

Thankfully, these problems are vastly overshadowed by what’s done right here, and shambling right alongside the character work are the simply stunning makeups and blood FX. For the first time in a long while, thanks to Greg Nicotero and his staff, zombies are legitimately scary again. In THE WALKING DEAD, they are creatures of wonder and disgust that elicit both mercy and hatred and provide a vehicle for not only grisly attacks, but some wonderfully emotional and powerful scenes (Andrea’s moment with her newly undead sister immediately comes to mind). And while we didn’t exactly get to know Jacqui (Jeryl Prescott) well enough to warrant a true connection in her big scene in “TS-19,” it’s entirely commendable that Darabont and co. have the ambition to really focus on their ensemble and attempt to give everyone their moments.

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The two-disc sets are lovely packages, and while a good number of the accompanying featurettes have been available on-line (which seems a bit disappointing, though it's nice to have them collected), there's no doubt that everything from the 30-minute making-of to the topnotch, in-depth makeup segments to simple visits with Kirkman hanging on set will hold your interest. However, the lack of commentary from Darabont, who's always a pleasure to listen to, is a bit saddening.

THE WALKING DEAD isn't a great series just yet, but is well on its way. It's entirely likely that season two will reach amazing heights, and until it returns, there's not much better, both television- and zombie-wise, you could do than revisit season one.

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