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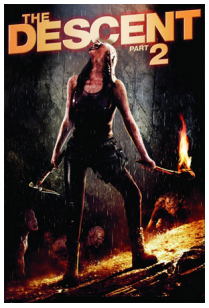
This was always going to be tricky to pull off. When a sequel to perhaps the first horror film of the 21st century to likely be regarded as a classic was announced, the filmmakers basically threw themselves into their own figurative uncharted cave system, ready to be devoured by a mass of lurking genre fans. With its Stateside releases this week on Lionsgate DVD, however, the good news is that it seems they’ve been able to escape with only a few missing limbs and flesh wounds to contend with.

THE DESCENT: PART 2 picks up, oddly enough and despite original reports of the contrary, from the original UK ending of the first film, but honestly, you can’t really tell (more on this later). Sarah Carter (Shauna MacDonald) has found her way out of the caves, away from the Crawlers and into a hospital bed where she can rest her weary, and probably insane, head. Meanwhile, a rescue team is searching underground for her missing friends, unaware of the fact that their leader Juno misled everyone into a different set of caves. When Sarah is reported found—stained with a whole lot of blood that isn’t hers—Sheriff Vaines (Gavan O’Herlihy) and his rookie officer Rios (Krysten Cummings) question her and decide the best idea is to take Sarah back down into the caverns to find her friends (or victims, as far as Vaines sees it).



While sending an obviously traumatized woman back into the dangerous subterranean labyrinth is a rather silly launching point for this storyline, it serves its purpose of getting us back into the thick of things. Accompanying Sarah, Vaines and Rios are three cave-diving volunteers, Greg (Joshua Dallas), Cath (Anna Skellern) and Dan (Douglas Hodge). Once they’re down in the depths, dead bodies begin to crop up, Sarah’s memory starts to come back and a gunshot creates a bit of a boulder-shifting catastrophe. Eventually, the group gets split up, and they all separately have to face our feral friends.

The Crawlers show up relatively quickly, and once they do, the film really moves. The filmmakers know that returning viewers are well aware of the nature of the threat, and choose to get at our nervous systems by making the attacks furious and a whole lot bloodier, rather than evoking the uncertainty and claustrophobia of the previous movie. As far as the aesthetics go, the caves don’t feel as authentic this time around, and definitely not as tight. But this works for two reasons: 1) new director/original editor Jon Harris doesn’t seem as concerned with playing off that “small spaces” aspect; PART 2 isn’t about being stuck and not knowing what’s around you in the dark, and 2) Paul Hyett’s special FX are incredible. Much applause should be sent his way for the excellent and seriously nasty blood and gore on display.

What’s really most surprising about THE DESCENT: PART 2 is that any of it works at all, but Harris is quite clever in how he revisits certain setpieces from its predecessor. At first glance, it almost seems as if he’s mimicking some of the original’s scares, but he actually twists your expectations of and memories of them (like where the Crawlers will pop up). Unfortunately, you won’t care as much about the new crop of characters aside from Rios, who gets a little bit more depth than everyone else. Herlihy does what he can, but Sheriff Vaines is very clichéd and one-note. The best performances come from the veterans: MacDonald, who once again essays an enduring yet horribly affected Sarah Carter, and Natalie Mendoza, whose Juno comes back with a vengeance.

The main issues with the film lie in the writing, which just isn’t very strong. While the direction, special makeup and performances carry the film into above-average territory, you get the feeling that with a better script, this would have truly been a home run of a sequel. And though the practical FX are stellar, there are two CG falling shots that practically ruin the effectiveness of what immediately came before them, and that’s a total shame.

The logic of the film’s opening is also very murky, as it doesn’t seem to directly pick up from either the UK or altered U.S. ending. On the DVD’s commentary, Harris claims that they intended for the original British finale to seamlessly transition into the beginning of this film, in which Sarah’s child leads her to running water and she manages to escape. This scene, however, is nowhere to be found in the film, and is also absent from the DVD’s deleted-scenes section. It’s not a huge deal, but that footage sounds genuinely interesting and apparently involved a fair amount of stuntwork, so it’s a surprise not only that the filmmakers excised it, but that it’s not among the supplemental materials (which do, however, include a completely uninteresting variation on the opening credits).

When Juno reappears at the beginning of the last act, everything really kicks into gear, and the climactic scenes are terrific, making it easy to forget the missteps that came before. Then the

final 30 seconds happen, and THE DESCENT: PART 2 concludes on a contrived and needless “twist” of a scare. It makes absolutely no sense, and isn’t bleak in the haunting, beautiful sense of the prior movie; instead, it’s bleak in a moronic and completely cheap way, and almost begs for a third film (when this one wasn’t even necessary).

In addition to the commentary and deleted scenes, the film is accompanied by a making-of featurette, but you can skip the latter in favor of the talk track, which features Harris and actresses MacDonald, Cummings and Skellern. It contains much of the same information, but is more in-depth, interesting and fun, as all four speakers are in good spirits. The deleted scenes aren’t revelations, but there’s an interesting parallel to the first movie’s early hospital nightmare that’s worth a look.

Despite its faults, THE DESCENT: PART 2 warrants a viewing; the problem is that those flaws are significant and hinder a lot of what’s done right. It definitely doesn’t stack up to the first, but there’s a good amount of fun and scares to be had, and if you’re a serious fan of the original, you’ll want to check it out at least once.

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DVD PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀

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