

“BLACK DEATH” (Fantasia Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

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With BLACK DEATH, it's high time that director Christopher Smith be acknowledged as one of the major modern forces in horror. The British filmmaker been getting better with each successive movie, and his latest (which had its North American premiere at the recent [Fantasia film festival](#) in Montreal) is a striking, mature and deeply scary piece of work.

If Smith hasn't been as celebrated as some of his contemporaries in the genre field, it could be because the widely varied nature of his output has made him hard to pin down. His debut picture, CREEP, was a straightforward survival shocker, and he followed it up with the satirical slasher SEVERANCE and then the cerebral mind-bender TRIANGLE. BLACK DEATH, his first period piece, is a character-based chiller, with a story (scripted by WILDERNESS' Dario Poloni) that explores many different levels of human evil.



It's also bolstered by a pair of first-rate performances in the lead roles. Osmund (Eddie Redmayne, who resembles a young Willem Dafoe and has the same haunted intensity behind his eyes) is a young monk who's minding his own business—including a bit of not-necessarily-sanctioned frolicking with cute maiden Averill (Kimberley Nixon)—in a medieval British village when a band of knights arrives. The Black Plague is sweeping the country, and the holy warriors, led by Ulric (Sean Bean), are seeking a village that is rumored to be completely immune from its ravages—a protection they believe can only be the result of black magic. They require a guide to lead them through the marshes to this community, and Osmund volunteers for the task. Ulric and his men agree to take him on with some reluctance, unsure if this mere boy is prepared for the trek to come, but his callowness will come to be the least of

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their worries.

The early stages of their trip may bring a smile to some faces, as they echo those seen in *MONTY PYTHON AND THE HOLY GRAIL*: Ulric and co. first encounter a mob persecuting a suspected witch, then a group of wandering self-flagellators. Everything's played with a persuasive straight face, however, and the lengthy journey gives all the characters a chance to reveal, via both words and action, their views on and relationships with their faith, the taking of life and other serious issues. Smith and Poloni don't flinch in their depiction of both violence and its consequences, and the bluntly staged mayhem and affecting dialogue are complemented by the rich lensing, on German locations, by local cinematographer Sebastian Edschmid. A late-night riverside conversation between Ulric and Osmund is particularly evocative due to Edschmid's use of sparing light, deep darkness and silhouette.

Things seem to brighten up a bit, in both senses of the word, when the group find their way to that village, and are welcomed by its inhabitants. The townspeople offer their visitors food, drink and a few uninhibited women, but it's clear—to us if not immediately to the knights—that there's more to the place than meets the eye. Here endeth any detailed description of the narrative, because from here, *BLACK DEATH* takes a series of turns that repeatedly realign the viewer's sympathies, and subvert easy assumptions about who the evildoers are, as well as whether that wickedness is supernaturally motivated or simply a matter of human nature.

Tackling questions of religion and adherence to it throughout, Smith and Poloni never forget that they're telling a dramatic, scary story first and foremost, and it's quite the ripping yarn, as the Brits might once have described it. Nor do the filmmakers attempt to score easy points at the expense of one belief system over another; the ultimate message is that any of them can be perverted to violent ends, and it's frightening to watch the characters commit ungodly acts in the name of their ideologies. Redmayne and Bean, who wage the greatest struggles to preserve their convictions and their lives, are thoroughly compelling throughout, with strong support by John Lynch as one of the more sympathetic of Ulric's band, Carice van Houten as the matriarch of the unafflicted village and old hand David Warner, seen briefly as one of Osmund's monastery superiors. Also notable are the production and costume design by John Frankish and Petra Wellenstein—the movie has a modest but deeply authentic look—and especially the first-rate score by Christian Henson, Smith's frequent collaborator (and son of *PSYCHOMANIA* star Nicky Henson!).

As it nears its final reel, *BLACK DEATH* seems to be building to an apocalyptic confrontation between light and darkness, or perhaps a sublime moment of reckoning *à la* *THE WICKER MAN* (to which this movie bears a number of similarities). It is in fact neither, and the conclusion

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at first seems anticlimactic, until you see that Smith and Poloni are working toward something else: a windup whose punch is emotional—and allegorical—rather than visceral. Their endgame is unexpected for being so personally grounded, and throws everything that has come before into new relief—while leaving you thoroughly chilled with the revelation of the story’s true dark heart.



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