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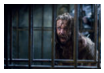

Patrick Tatopoulos is one of the judges on FACE OFF, the Syfy competition/elimination series exploring the world of special FX make-up artists. Tatopoulos, of course, is the creature designer/FX supervisor behind such films as GODZILLA, PITCH BLACK, SILENT HILL and many more, including the first two UNDERWORLD movies. However, for 2009’s UNDERWORLD: RISE OF THE LYCANS, Tatopoulos forfeited the FX duties in order to make his feature-length directorial debut.

As a prequel to the previous two films in its trilogy, UNDERWORLD: RISE OF THE LYCANS doesn’t so much answer burning questions they posed as dramatize backstory that has only been spoken of before. And it raises a few queries of its own.

To wit, what exactly are the rules of werewolf transformation? There are a number of meaningful shots of the full moon, but it generally seems that the Lycans can assume beastly form whenever they please. The vampires (a.k.a. Death Dealers) who rule the medieval-ish land in which RISE is set keep the captive, enslaved Lycans from assuming hair and fangs with special collars—and yet hero Lucian (Michael Sheen) doesn’t go monstrous at certain points late in the film when it might be advantageous to do so, even though he doesn’t have a collar on.

Best not to ponder details like this and enjoy UNDERWORLD: RISE OF THE LYCANS for what it is: a pulpily enjoyable B-movie dressed up with all the slick production values its predecessors’ box-office success can buy. With Len Wiseman, who helmed the first two movies, having moved on to the greener pastures of the last DIE HARD flick, the director’s chair has been assumed by Patrick Tatopoulos, who has overseen the FX for the entire franchise and here smoothly maintains the UNDERWORLD traditions of Gothic, gloomy atmosphere (the sun

apparently never rises in this realm, except when it’s required to kill a vampire or two) and a combination of monster action and breathless romance.

In the script by co-creator Danny McBride and newcomers Dirk Blackman and Howard McCain, these elements have been mixed into a SPARTACUS-esque story of slave revolt, with a touch of 300-esque he-man posturing. Lucian, the first of the half-breed Lycans, has been used by the ruling bloodsucker Viktor (Bill Nighy) to sire a werewolf workforce, and has also been secretly fooling around on the side with Sonja (Rhona Mitra), Viktor’s beloved but headstrong and rebellious daughter. Lucian’s love for Sonja leads him to chafe even more at his and his fellow Lycans’ enslavement, and the dramatic side of RISE’s story is built from familiar parts: the illicit meetings, heroic speeches, sadistic jailers and punishments meted out to Lucian (who suffers possibly the worst physical abuse of a screen protagonist since THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST), plus assorted tensions and plotting amidst Viktor’s underlings.

The actors approach their roles with a commitment befitting their characters’ passions. Nighy, whose star has ascended significantly since he played Viktor as a supporting role in the first UNDERWORLD, clearly isn’t taking the material too seriously and has a ball with his expanded part, wrapping his tongue around the vampire lord’s imperious dialogue and chewing large hunks of the scenery. Sheen, who has gone to bigger places himself recently with acclaimed turns in THE QUEEN and FROST/NIXON, is solid, earnest and has effective Romeo-and-Juliet chemistry with Mitra. Steven Mackintosh and David Ashton each bite off a couple of good moments as members of Viktor’s court, and it’s nice to see Kevin Grevioux, he of the imposing presence and basso profundo voice, return to the franchise he helped create as Lucian’s sidekick Raze.

As for the monstrous side of things, the CGI that makes up the bulk of the werewolf FX has improved by leaps and bounds since the initial UNDERWORLD—literally in some scenes, as the creatures jump along trees and lope across fields after their human prey (despite their threat, everyone insists on traveling to Viktor’s castle by night). Though the action is sporadic in

the first hour, Tatopoulos orchestrates a couple of neat setpieces, one involving beasts attacking via underground tunnels, and the climactic clashes between the supernatural species have all the blood and thunder a fan of this franchise could ask for. Inevitably, it all comes down to a sword-swinging showdown between Lucian and Viktor, which doesn’t carry all the tension it might because anyone who would see this film in the first place knows that both have to live to fight another day (or century).

There’s not much that’s new in RISE OF THE LYCANS, either within its specific franchise or for the assorted genres it draws from, but nor does it have the feel of something simply thrown together to keep the series going. “Every war has a beginning,” say the ads, and with the UNDERWORLD saga now apparently fully told, this is a pretty decent place for it to end.