After the countless indie genre movies wearing the influence of NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD and DAWN OF THE DEAD on their blood-smeared sleeves without carrying over the human interest, it’s nice to see one that’s more in the character-based vein of THE WALKING DEAD—though the production of THE COLLAPSED predates the airing of the AMC show. And while hardcore horror fans should be advised that Canadian writer/director Justin McConnell takes the tack of keeping the physical threat largely offscreen, he nonetheless builds a considerable amount of tension simply through the efforts of his protagonists to survive it.

We first meet the Weaver family—father Scott (John Fantasia), mother Emily (Lisa Moule) and their son Aaron (Steve Vieira) and daughter Rebecca (Anna Ross) as they’re bunkered down in the darkness of an abandoned building, the distant sounds of gunfire and explosions outside. We aren’t initially told the exact nature of what’s going on, but all we need to know are the basics: Some kind of infection has swept the populace, resulting in mass death and decimation, and the Weavers appear to be among the few survivors. With civilization, well, collapsing, Scott decides they should flee the city and head for their previous hometown of Dover’s Bend, where his estranged son may still be living. The trek through the rural countryside (shot on assorted Ontario locations) will be a dangerous one, though, due not only to the deadly presences lurking just out of sight amidst the trees, but to the uninfected humans who have nonetheless resorted to violence to keep themselves alive.

It’s a familiar scenario, of course, but McConnell makes it work by keeping a tight focus on the Weavers’ family dynamic—and in the process, using the familiarity of the postapocalyptic-survival subgenre to his advantage. As if knowing that viewers will be well aware of the tropes of the form, he doesn’t get into a lot of unnecessary explanations or backgrounding. Rather, he drops us into the midst of the situation, gives us the very broad strokes of what’s going on and then follows the Weavers on the run, through the woods and a few abandoned dwellings, trying to keep themselves together, formulate (and agree on) a plan and dodge those who are trying to kill them.

McConnell sprinkles enough violent encounters through THE COLLAPSED to keep his narrative from running in place—and even more crucially, doesn’t always take them in the direction you expect. While the movie’s emphasis is on slow-burning suspense, there are a few moments that are genuinely shocking, paying off on the emotional investment the writer/director builds for his characters. He gets good work out of his actors, too, who do strong work both as individuals and in establishing a believable, cohesive family, even as the parents and children often disagree on the course of action to take.

He and co-producer/co-story writer/designer Kevin Hutchinson have also overseen a technically polished production that’s slick without vamping for viewer attention—visually and aurally, it enhances the drama while staying out of its way. There’s a naturalistic feel to both Pasha Patriki’s sharp RED cinematography and George Flores’ sound design that keeps the proceedings identifiable, with an effective score by Rob Kleiner that eschews the rattle and hum often heard in movies of this type. The makeup FX by Carlos Henriques (veteran of a number of Canadian-lensed genre productions) et al. follow suit, remaining simple and visceral rather than indulging in exaggerated “infected” visages.

“Modest” is probably not a good word to use to try to build enthusiasm for an indie fright flick these days, but it’s one of THE COLLAPSED’s virtues that it doesn’t try to out-gross or out-flash the many other features in its field. Its goals are simple, its aim is direct and in keeping the viewer tense, guessing and occasionally gasping, it gets the job done. You can see the movie's official website here .

{jcomments on}