

“THE WALKING DEAD” Episode One: “Days Gone By” (TV Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
Wednesday, 27 October 2010 16:57



After watching the pilot episode of THE WALKING DEAD, I can say it's almost a given that a good number of reviews in print and on-line will begin with some variation of “Wow.” And to be honest, it's a hard urge to fight. In a time when most zombie tales amount to “fun” or “a good time,” it's surprising and elating to witness one that leaves you on the verge of speechlessness—and just might do so on a weekly basis.

That's probably the strongest aspect (among many) of THE WALKING DEAD (premiering Halloween night at 10 p.m./9 p.m. Central on AMC): the fact that it isn't a two-hour film, but a series. Like the Robert Kirkman comic it's based on (which is still ongoing), the show makes it clear we're going to be spending a lot of time with its characters, getting to know them and ultimately emotionally connecting with them as they settle into a new world, as we are made witness to its changes.



After a gutsy prologue, the series begins before all hell breaks loose and our protagonist, deputy Rick Grimes, and his partner Shane are enjoying some fast food and relationship talk when they're interrupted by a dangerous high-speed pursuit. The pursuit ends with Rick shot twice and landing in hospital in a coma; upon waking up, he quickly discovers something's seriously wrong and goes off in search of his wife Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies) and young son Carl (Chandler Riggs) amidst a world of living dead.

Riding along on Rick's journey as he's birthed into this strange new land is a marvelous

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experience, daring the viewer to see zombies with fresh new eyes. There’s been an oversaturation of undead-related projects in all forms of media recently, and the idea conjured up upon hearing of another tends to be something in the comedy realm, or that makes us cheer as we watch ghoulish brains explode. But THE WALKING DEAD has a more natural (well, as natural as a tale of the deceased coming back can be) tone. There are small moments of comedy that occur organically, but when it comes to the corpses, there’s a sense of seriousness and despair that any similarly themed piece hasn’t achieved in a long time.



This is all realized thanks to the excellent efforts of writer/director Frank Darabont, cinematographer David Tattersall, makeup FX artist Greg Nicotero and actor Lincoln. The latter is very much the star of this episode, which follows Grimes out of the hospital to his home, holing up with survivors Morgan (Lennie Jones) and his son Duane (Adrian Kali Turner) and eventually on the beginning of a quest toward Atlanta. Darabont and Tattersall give the show an overcast and dreary look, the way a particularly rainy/grey day can make any neighborhood look like a shithole. Nicotero’s ghouls are easily the best the genre has seen in the past 20 years or so (seriously, the bicycle zombie is nothing short of incredible). They are gory and horrifying, but most importantly haunting and often saddening. When Rick puts one down, it’s almost out of kindness, as you can feel the misery of its existence—that is, of course, when they’re isolated and easy to handle. By the time Rick comes upon a horde, their feelings aren’t exactly a priority.

Those of Morgan and Duane are, however. Rick spends a chunk of the pilot in their home, and you don’t have to look much further than this father and son for proof that character development is paramount here. Also, kudos should be bestowed upon Darabont for not inserting cheap scares at any opportunity. There are plenty of moments when Rick, Duane or Morgan are off on their own that don’t go the easy route to raise tension—because the tension’s already there. It’s a little overwhelming when you realize that this series could hold the next cast of characters you very easily cry over, and that they’re in a world much more dangerous than most on television. Thankfully, the showrunners and creators understand this, and know that the stakes are high enough. The premiere doesn’t give us much time with the camp containing Lori and Carl and the rest of Kirkman’s familiar ensemble, but what it is on display only confirms that casting looks to be shipshape.

“Days Gone By” is an astonishing introduction to THE WALKING DEAD. Atmospheric, creepy, stunningly violent and epic, it promises that this series will be every bit “that something special”

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we were all hoping it would be.



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