

Elegies: American Film Market 2010 Genre Roundup, Part Two

Written by Tony Timpone

Wednesday, 24 November 2010 13:06



It's an unseasonably warm November day in Santa Monica, CA, with the temperature shooting past 90 degrees. You won't find me at the beach, though. I'm ensconced at the [American Film Market](#) watching movies from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. at the industry trade event. See part one of my six-day movie marathon [here](#) and stop back Monday for the final chapter.



THE RESIDENT: The second film from the revitalized Hammer Films comes as a letdown following the worthier-than-expected LET ME IN, which Stephen King himself called “the best American horror film in 20 years.” I doubt King will feel the same about THE RESIDENT, which, although a slick, competent production, rarely rises above a typical Lifetime woman-in-jeopardy movie. Two-time Oscar winner Hilary Swank toplines as an emergency-room doctor who moves into an old Brooklyn apartment building, with spectacular views of the Bridge, lots of space, cheap rent and a handsome, helpful landlord (WATCHMEN’s Jeffrey Dean Morgan). Said landlord, however, soon becomes obsessed with his tenant after a failed attempt at romance and begins spying on her through peepholes, then stalking her. Vintage Hammer star Christopher Lee appears in a few scenes as the man’s grandfather, but there’s little else here to set pulses racing and few surprises. **★★★**



THE LAST CIRCUS: I'm a huge fan of Spanish filmmaker Álex de la Iglesia (DAY OF THE BEAST, LA COMUNIDAD, PERDITA DURANGO), but this latest movie (a.k.a. BALADA TRISTE DE TROMPETA/BALLAD OF THE SAD TRUMPET) left me cold. The story opens in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, when costumed circus performers are abruptly forced to join the militia and march into battle. You have not lived until you've witnessed the sight of

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TORRENTE actor Santiago Segura, in full clown regalia, swinging a machete during a fierce combat scene (the movie's best moment). Segura's grown-up son (Carlos Areces) follows in Dad's career footsteps, but tragedy has made him a sad clown. When he joins a circus of his own, he falls for a beautiful dancer (Carolina Bang), who's in an abusive relationship with a happy clown (Antonio de la Torre). A violent love triangle ensues, culminating in gross facial mutilations and an unconvincing NORTH BY NORTHWEST-esque finale atop a giant building-sized cross. A political allegory best appreciated in its native country, the operatic LAST CIRCUS ultimately emerges as a downbeat mess and not much fun at all. ■■■



JULIA'S EYES (also pictured above): In this Spanish film, actress Belén Rueda reunites with her ORPHANAGE producer Guillermo del Toro, but the results disappoint when compared to the power of that previous collaboration. Rueda plays Julia, the twin sister of a blind woman who commits suicide in the film's opening moments. But Julia, who is also losing her sight, believes that someone either murdered her sis or coerced her into hanging herself, so she begins her own investigation, much to the consternation of her disbelieving husband (Lluís Homar). The film's highlight finds Julia spying on her sister's blind friends, who sense her presence, in a locker room, while a stalker tails Julia. Yes, before long, Julia's own life is in jeopardy, but will she be able to solve the mystery before she goes blind and save herself? It's not a big leap to figure out the culprit in JULIA'S EYES, and the final revelation, with a talky killer who just won't shut up, comes across as silly and unconvincing. ■■■



MOTHER'S DAY: Why would the people remaking the 1980 cult favorite call their movie MOTHER'S DAY when the new version has little if nothing in common with the original film? The first MOTHER'S DAY, directed by Troma chief Lloyd Kaufman's brother Charles, followed in the vein of '70s exploitation hits I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE and THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT, as two brutalized girls get revenge (in glorious gory fashion) on a family of attackers at a cabin in the woods. The new MOTHER'S DAY, on the other hand, is a home-invasion saga, as a gang of violent bank-robbing brothers holds a group of partying friends (inexplicably throwing a bash with a dangerous storm on the way) hostage in the villains' former foreclosed suburban house. Then Mother (Rebecca De Mornay) comes a-callin' and all hell breaks loose. SAW sequel director Darren Lynn Bousman knows how to ratchet up the suspense here and there, but the overlong MOTHER'S DAY soon grows tiresome and tedious, with endless scenes of the tough-talking crooks roughing up their victims. A good cast (TRUE BLOOD's Deborah Ann Woll,

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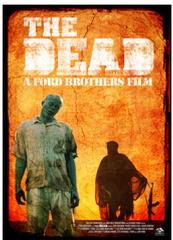
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THE RUINS' Shawn Ashmore, SORORITY ROW's Briana Evigan, etc.) is on hand, but we don't care as much as we should. The determined De Mornay, however, perfects the crazy act she first exercised in THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE 18 (!) years ago. **★★★**



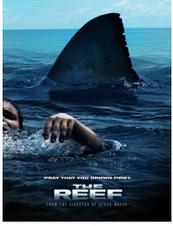
GOOD NEIGHBOURS: I knew very little about this oddball Canadian film going in, except that it starred funny guy Jay Baruchel (THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE, TROPIC THUNDER) and it involved a serial killer. What a deliciously dark surprise! Baruchel is the new tenant in an old Montreal apartment building, located in a neighborhood where a maniac has been raping and killing women. Baruchel's neighbors include the wheelchair-bound Scott Speedman (never better) and a pretty but morose waitress (Emily Hampshire), plus the resident crazy lady who screams at everyone and poisons cats. Writer/director Jacob Tierney (of THE TROTSKY, also with Baruchel) keeps things off-kilter and expertly captures the offbeat nature of his characters, as well as the chilly winter nights of his setting. Tierney doesn't hold back in the movie's perverted murder setpiece either, nor does he come up with a pat resolution in the end. GOOD NEIGHBOURS has definite sleeper potential and reminded me of great indie director Paul Bartel's best work, particularly PRIVATE PARTS. **★★★**



THE DEAD: I'm tempted to say, "Oh, no, not another zombie film," but when it's as good as this one, like Germany's RAMMBOCK, keep 'em comin'! Britain's Ford brothers (writer/directors Howard and Jonathan) tell their undead story on a stunningly unique location: West Africa, where a zombie plague has ravaged the arid lands. When his escape plane crashes, an American mercenary (Rob Freeman) must evade hordes of the all-black native flesheaters, and eventually teams with a local military man (Prince David Oseia) in search of his missing young son. THE DEAD features some Fulci-style zombie makeups and good splatter FX (achieved on a nothing budget) to whet appetites. The film's sun-blinding, wide-open landscape—making it impossible to hide—ramps up the suspense, and we really grow to care about our heroes as they try to survive their harsh environment and make it to safety (think Cornel Wilde in THE NAKED PREY). Though THE DEAD could use about 10 minutes shaved from its running time, zombie buffs will gobble this one up. **★★★**

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THE REEF: You'll spot plenty of sharks at the AFM—both the human kind doing business over at the Loews Hotel and the aquatic breed chowing down on the big screen. Shark movies are a perennial at this trade market, with at least two in production being sold this year (BAIT and David Ellis' untitled 3D production), and Australia's THE REEF making its U.S. screening debut. THE REEF comes from BLACK WATER co-director Andrew Traucki, who tackled a killer crocodile in that effort. For THE REEF, he draws similar inspiration from true events as a group of vacationers become stranded at sea when their yacht capsizes near the Great Barrier Reef. Stranded in the vast Pacific Ocean, four of the survivors decide to swim for land (many miles away), but they run the risk of becoming seafood. And that's exactly what happens when a great white drops by and begins picking them off. Though it's reminiscent of the similarly themed OPEN WATER, I liked THE REEF better, as it's a sharper-looking production (beautifully shot by Daniel Ardilley), more suspenseful and scarier. The movie eschews the typical cable-TV CGI approach with its shark, seemingly utilizing the real thing in its sparse but effective attack scenes. Like the best killer-fish tales, THE REEF successfully exploits our deep-rooted fears of a cruel sea where we're on the menu. **B+**

TO BE CONTINUED

{comments on}