

“SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD” (Film Review)

Written by Chris Alexander
Saturday, 24 April 2010 06:35



To call George A. Romero’s latest zombie thriller a horror movie is only half right. Certainly, this sixth entry in his 40-year-old series details what happens when the dead return, armed with a blind instinct to rip the soft parts of the living to shreds—but, as any serious scholar of these pictures knows, none of Romero’s DEAD films are alike.

The first was a gritty, black-and-white exercise in nihilistic nightmare logic; the second, a day-glo action/satire epic with a brash, bass-heavy prog-rock score courtesy of Italian supergroup Goblin. The third entry trapped its characters in a profane, sexist ticking-time-bomb tomb, mining claustrophobia to sweaty effect while the zombie dregs bit at their doors. The higher-budgeted fourth feature detailed the effects of capitalists foolishly trying to use commerce to control the corpse problem, and the fifth was a low-budget, experimental musing on media manipulation.

Which brings us to SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD (available via video-on-demand and other platforms April 30, in select theaters May 28), and yeah, as you might have heard, it’s a Western. Specifically, the film is a direct quote from William Wyler’s sprawling 1958 melodrama THE BIG COUNTRY, starring Burl Ives, Charlton Heston and Gregory Peck. And though SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD—for the first time in the series—carries over one character from the previous film, it’s as alien to DIARY OF THE DEAD as DIARY is to DAWN is to NIGHT is to DAY. It’s a stand-alone...and, really, it stands alone.



Off the coast of Pennsylvania lies Plum Island, a remote, widescreen-friendly Shangri-La that

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unfortunately has not escaped the grip of the undead virus. The two chief forces vying for supremacy on Plum are O’Flynn (brilliantly realized by TWIN PEAKS’ Kenneth Welsh) and Muldoon (a solid Richard Fitzpatrick), childhood rivals who now, as old men and patriarchs of their respective clans, find themselves at war with each other, the fates of the escalating zombie population hanging in the balance.

DIARY’s Alan Van Sprang returns as Crockett, the rogue National Guardsman who leads his motley gaggle of mercenaries to Plum in hopes of escaping the horror that has enveloped the land. Instead, they find themselves wedged in the middle of the O’Flynn/Muldoon battle, and many skulls get kissed by bullets, even more intestines are liberated from their tummies and none of it ends particularly well.

The fact that the two protagonists are named O’Flynn and Muldoon—with both Welsh and Fitzpatrick affecting heavy, cartoonish Irish brogues—should immediately tip you off that SURVIVAL is Romero in full-on DAWN OF THE DEAD playtime mode. This is pure, old-fashioned pulp, breezy and designed to entertain and filled to the bursting point with bizarre, outlandish plot twists and buckets of sloppy, gruesome splatter. Which is not to say it lacks for eerie, disturbing moments. An opening conflict over the fates of two zombie children is chilling, and scenes of a dead girl galloping on horseback are abstract enough to achieve a kind of dream-state lyricism. The film is as much RIO LOBO as it is Fiddler’s Green, and those who fail to grasp the comic-book cheekiness of it all simply aren’t getting the gag.

By now, loyal DEAD fans expect the world-collapsing-within-itself climaxes of these pictures, where the barely contained zombie menace explodes into a feeding frenzy and the last few remaining characters are culled and cannibalized. We want this, and Romero knows we want it. In the case of SURVIVAL, Canadian FX maestro Francois Dagenais really earns his keep, supplying scene after scene of wholesale flesh-ripping carnage that truly delivers the goods. If you’re familiar with Italian magic realist Federico Fellini’s landmark self-reflective masterpiece 8 1/2, these violent, latex-and-syrup-soaked finales always remind me of the climax of that picture, where Fellini literally lets his movie careen into carnival chaos and every major and minor character just explodes into frame, literally marching the picture into the fadeout.

Am I being too “film school” by saying that? Perhaps. But really, at this point in his career, Romero can be seen as a sort of riff on Marcello Mastroianni in 8 1/2: He’s a similarly beloved director who keeps trying to make these personal pictures while his backers demand populist product—but in this case, he has to deal with those pesky walking corpses that follow him around the world, infiltrating his sets and taking over. I get the feeling Romero is often trying to outrun the dead. He resists their influence and—in SURVIVAL especially—you feel that pull

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somewhat, as Romero tries to set up a faithful throwback to the brawny adventures he loved as a youth, and those damned ghouls just keep clawing their way in. Eventually, he simply accepts them, throws up his hands and literally allows them to chew up the scenery. It's glorious and rewarding to see him surrender.

That's why, no matter what picture he's crafting, no matter how hard mainstream critics and tunnel-visioned fanboys try to jam him into the knothole of “master of horror,” Romero refuses to be pigeonholed. At the ripe old age of 70, he's still impossible to properly contextualize and refuses to behave or bow down entirely to what is expected of him. Sure, this almost punk-rock chip of defiance pisses off journalists who seek to put an easily identifiable box around his efforts. No easy task, that.

If SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD has a flaw, it's the same one that has marked all three of his “Toronto” zombie films in that the score is invisible, forgettable. In NIGHT we got those terrifying needle-drop cues; DAWN showcased the more humorous library tracks plus that great Goblin rock; and in DAY we had John Harrison's eerie, sad calypso synth stuff. SURVIVAL's score is a mash of ominous doom and screeching string gooses that do the austere imagery (Arv Greywal's budget-cheating production design is impressive, as are Alex Kavanagh's effectively redneck zombie getups) little emotional service. Bring back “The Gonk,” George, and all will be forgiven.

Ultimately, this is a rollicking, rambunctious, often hilarious, frequently revolting inversion of genres that could only come from Romero. Is it scary? Well, that's subjective. Is it the work of a filmmaker who successfully manages to have it all ways, to make the movies he wants to make, to tell the tales he wants to tell and still remain the king of his own orbit? Absolutely. Seen as a stand-alone movie, SURVIVAL OF THE DEAD is a great, eccentric, tightly paced and unconventional film. Viewed as a piece of Romero's ongoing cinematic puzzle, it's essential.



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