

“THE REVENANT” (Film Review)

Written by Chris Alexander
Sunday, 16 May 2010 08:18



For a critic like me who is not only a serious lover of horror but of films in general, watching THE REVENANT is a genuine pleasure. Written and directed by PHANTASM sequel FX wizard D. Kerry Prior, the film has been enjoying much international fest love over the past year or so, winning awards and picking up a cult of fans. And rightfully so: This is a brilliant, sophisticated horror/comedy that manages to play within a familiar framework while deftly defying clichés at every turn.

Iraq war vet Bart (HEROES' David Anders) returns from the East in a body bag, much to the dismay of his girlfriend Janet (Louise Griffiths) and slovenly best friend Joey (Chris Wylde, channeling Michael Keaton). But although the picture begins at Bart's funeral and we see his corpse and coffin planted firmly in the ground, he's not really dead. Bart returns from the grave, rotting, confused and thirsting for blood. Turns out he's a kind of vampire and, with Joey's enthusiastically freaked-out help, begins cruising the LA night, looking for crooks and evildoers to drain of their fluids.



But that's just the setup of THE REVENANT, which begins as a buddy-vamp farce with romantic complications (Bart's girlfriend still wants to be with him, despite the whole undead thing) and then keeps morphing and altering its mission statement, until you're never quite sure whether to laugh or scream. Every scene of this film drips with character. An early sequence in a blood bank, where the shambling Bart, armed with a fake Uzi, tries to rob some of the red stuff from a no-nonsense nurse, is fully developed, with a blood-bag tug of war punctuated by the concerned RN frantically trying to preach the benefits of Scientology. Then there's a convenience-store robbery, where a hulking African-American gangbanger takes time out from

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trash-talking and gun-waving to have a heated, intelligent debate on black/white race relations with the invulnerable Bart. It's hilarious and clever and completely eccentric, much like every inch of the rest of the picture.

There's something about THE REVENANT's first half that reminds me of the slick, R-rated urban comedies from the early '80s—stuff like NIGHT SHIFT and especially RISKY BUSINESS. Before you laugh at that last comparison, THE REVENANT's sparse, toney Tangerine Dream-esque score, frequent city-by-night car rides and romantic melancholy offsetting the increasingly absurd comedy are kissing cousins to that fantastic 1983 film (don't believe me? Watch BUSINESS again...there's much more to it than Tom Cruise dancing around in his tighty-whites).

But when the pic gets darker—and it does—there's plenty of NEAR DARK and even LIFEFORCE influence as well. And of course, the connection to Bob Clark's seminal vampire-vet shocker DEATHDREAM can't be denied either. Still, to saddle the film with too many reference points is to undermine the ferocious, gleefully insane originality and craft Prior displays here. Everything clicks in THE REVENANT, everything. From the simple concept, to the even-tempered pacing, to the oddly believable, charming performances, to the loud moments of splatter, to the natural way the mood careens between lighthearted farce and serious horror, to its delirious, operatically ghoulish finale, this one has it all. And a special nod to Peter Hawkins' inky cinematography...delicious.

Forget SHAUN OF THE DEAD; this is the best dark fantasy/comedy I've seen since classic stuff I hold so dear to my heart, masterworks like RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD, RE-ANIMATOR, ROBOCOP and FRIGHT NIGHT. Why? Because it doesn't sacrifice the shock value of the situation in favor of cheap laughs. The comedy in THE REVENANT makes sense, serving as observational counterpoint to the madness of the situation, closer to AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON than to the similarly plotted but dismal DEAD HEAT.

Can you tell I loved this movie? Well, I did—ohhh boy, did I ever. Please, God, let some savvy distributor pick this thing up and make sure it gets a theatrical run. It's the toughest, scrappiest, most satisfying and amusing horror film I've seen all year, full stop.



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