Hey there, 2011. How the heck are ya? Glad to make your acquaintance. Have I got some resolutions for you! Lately, I've been slacking in the blog department, but it's a new year and it brings along a newfound sense of responsibility and wonderment—and by that I mean I will be much more productive on the Face Riff front. Have I been busy? You bet I've been busy. The past few months have included a two month tour of Europe with the Dillinger Escape Plan, copious holiday parties and way too much LAW AND ORDER: SVU. In the midst of the chaos, my time seemed to disappear like virginity in a slasher flick and November first quickly morphed into the new year. Somewhere in that time warp, I managed to do some amazing horror-related activities. So now, in an effort to recap the end of 2010 and begin anew with a long-overdue brain purging, I give you the first of three NEW YEARS RIFF-OLUTIONS: the best of my November and December.

Touring in foreign countries affords me the luxury of experiencing a host of different cultures and traditions and October found me in the merry land of England. While I was more than bummed that I wouldn't be able to spend my Halloween at home, scaring little kids with my annual porch-side screenings of classic horror films (last year was DEAD ALIVE) while passing out candy, I was a bit curious to see how the British did things on their side of the ocean. Luckily, Manchester was hosting their annual Grimm Up North Horror & Sci-Fi Festival and, after a fully costumed Dillinger Escape Plan played to a sold-out crowd at the Manchester Academy, I made my way to the celebration to see the horrific sights and catch a flick.

As I headed up the street toward the festival, my feet seemed a bit apprehensive. Block after block, I walked the eerily empty streets of Manchester like a rock 'n' roll Omega Man. My concerns grew as the fear of a wrong turn or misdirection seemed more and more plausible. In the distance, however, the streets slowly filled with zombies, vampires; sexy zombies and vampires; and various other costume-clad citizenry. My feet regained their composure as I spotted the brightly illuminated marquee in the distance. It beckoned to us fright fans like a lighthouse to wayward ships. The festival was in full swing and I was in for an amazing night.

I walked into the venue and up the stairs to a makeshift theater that was near empty. Again, my concerns multiplied like mogwais in a bathtub. “Where is everyone?!” I thought to myself. No sooner than I could finish my sentence, the theater began filling with the aftermath of a zombie crawl that entire population of England was aware of except me. Amongst a sea of undead walkers, I was the sore thumb dressed in plain clothes; an ironic and comedic situation, for sure. I suppose these things happen.

As the seats disappeared under the zombies, it was quickly becoming a horrific sight to behold. For most, it was a postapocalyptic nightmare come true. But, for anyone who’s ever spent a night in the waiting room at Detroit Receiving Hospital after taking a guitar to the face (thanks, Dan), it was a strangely familiar sight and a recipe for homesickness. Soon the lights dimmed and the host took the stage to introduce the next feature—Mexico’s WE ARE WHAT WE ARE.

If you are unfamiliar with Jorge Michel Grau’s WE ARE WHAT WE ARE, I suggest you do something about it, immediately. This coming of age tale is said to do for cannibals what LET THE RIGHT ONE IN did for vampires. This comparison is almost begged for by the similar opening sequences in each film. Both feature a young, blank-faced protagonist tracing fingers along a window, which could stand as a mirror image of the other. While vampires have almost always been portrayed as tragically lonely and somewhat relatable antiheroes, cannibals typically fall somewhere on the opposite side of the humanistic spectrum. Mostly staples of the Grindhouse era, flesheaters have been universally depicted as one-dimensional and savage caricatures. While it may seem insurmountable to portray them as hapless victims of tradition and the product of unfortunate economic and environmental circumstance, WE ARE WHAT WE ARE does this and does it well. From its gritty visage to the shrieking score by Enrico Chapela to the somewhat enigmatic nature of the family’s flesheating, WE ARE WHAT WE ARE is both engaging and repulsive. This balance is a difficult one to strike, but when achieved it’s legs could walk on the tightest of ropes.

After the film, the lights came up on an awkwardly silent theater. We all stood with wavering legs under the WE ARE WHAT WE ARE’s existential weight. The zombies in the crowd labored out the door with an all-new sense of realism. This was the final feature of the festival. I mingled with the locals a bit before heading back to the bus for an impromptu movie marathon. The road passed under our wheels as HALLOWEEN (the original and the remake), CITY OF THE LIVING DEAD and several others played on the small screen.

So there you have it, the first of three. Help me keep this RIFF-OLUTION on track by staying

tuned for many more stories and anecdotes in the not-too-distant-future. Until then, keep it brutal and bloody!

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