The horror genre has a great history of Christmas films. There is just something about spending time with your extended family, preparing complicated meals and opening ill-thought-out gifts, that makes people want to take solace in murder and mayhem.

In 1984, the Santa slasher SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT was released and became an instant holiday classic, spinning off several overacted and mostly unconnected sequels. Today, Anchor Bay Entertainment opens SILENT NIGHT in limited theatrical runs, with the DVD/Blu-ray release following next Tuesday, December 4. Though the film is being touted as a remake, it’s really more of a loving nod to the original.

It’s Christmas Eve in a tiny rural town, and the sheriff (Malcolm McDowell) and his deputy (Jaime King) are on the hunt for a murderous Santa who is traversing the area, dispatching anyone “naughty.” The quest to find this killer Kringle is thwarted by the fact that tonight is the town’s annual “Santa Parade,” so a sea of St. Nicks is roaming the small burg.

This plot is a thin frame on which to hang Santa’s murderous actions, rather than a strong backbone. The film, directed by Steven C. Miller from a script by Jayson Rothwell, jumps straight into the killing and stays there, without any pesky backstory. Thanks to this lack of detailed explanations, the viewer spends much of the movie in confusion about who this maniac is and how he fits into this town of miscreants. The movie is full of “Santas,” resulting in endless confusion about who the “real” killer is; a small town like this could in reality support maybe two or three, but this place has endless rogue Santas roaming about, all of them criminals of some sort. The storyline doesn’t really unfold as much as just support the kill sequences, ending with a rather lazy and less-than-shocking twist.

Thus, most of the film is comprised of Santa’s endless slaying—and this part I will applaud. SILENT NIGHT sports great kills—and even better, you want these people to die…painfully. A bratty teen, a sleazy amateur porn crew and other social offenders fall victim to long, drawn-out, bloodsoaked setpieces, with weapons including a woodchipper, antlers (in a nod to the ’84 film) and a cattle prod. Given that 90 percent of the movie is focused on these gory demises, their creativity is refreshing, but a brief warning: The epic Santa-with-a-flamethrower sequence that looks so bad-ass in the trailer is actually a very small part of the movie, one that should have been teased out a bit more. That said, Vincent J. Guastini’s gore FX are excellent.

The heavy bloodletting does result in one gripe. Now, I’m not usually one to call out continuity problems; they’re an often unavoidable part of filmmaking, and it can be annoying when people meticulously rip apart films searching for them. But one SILENT NIGHT continuity error stands out big-time: Santa gets really gory during his kills—often bloodsoaked from beard to boots—yet then emerges seconds later in a new scene wearing a clean, freshly pressed suit and a pure white beard. Think of it like in a video game, where the bloodshed disappears after each screen. Though it works in those games, the magically vanishing blood seems unnatural here. Again, I hate calling out such glitches, but this one had a preview audience giggling and making comments about Santa’s amazing “one-hour dry cleaner.”

The cast isn’t bad, just very underused. King has some promising moments as the weak and oppressed deputy, but her small scenes are lost amidst Santa’s big kills. McDowell is, as always, a strong screen presence, but seems out of place as a gruff, hardened British lawman in this tiny rural town. The strongest casting choice was Donal Logue (perhaps best-known for his sitcom GROUNDED FOR LIFE, but more familiar to this reviewer as the taxi driver in the ’90s MTV commercials), playing another nasty Santa.

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