

Fantasia Day 5 & 6: “RETREAT,” “THE WICKER TREE,” etc.

Written by Ariel Esteban Cayer
Tuesday, 26 July 2011 08:09



I'm back! Not that I ever left, but as I'm writing these lines, it's already Day 11 and by the time they're posted, it'll probably be Day 13 already. My day-to-day existence has been so packed with films, I've barely had time to sleep and eat properly—you should see me abuse those pints of ice cream, you would probably puke at my recklessness.

That said, I'm having the time of my life. Currently in the thick of this year's [Fantasia festival](#), catching up has become a reason-defying challenge, but hopefully these undeniably late and uncharacteristically short updates still provide a good platform to look back on highlights of the fest so far. Fantasia keeps moving forward at an awesome, neck-breaking pace, and there is so much to write about, so let's get into this two-day catch-up right away.

Immediately following SUPERHEROES, which I review conjointly with SUPER [here](#), on Monday, I made my way across the street to what promised to be a considerable change of tone and pace...



RETREAT

First time director Carl Tibbetts' much-hyped remote-location thriller *RETREAT*, starring Cillian Murphy, Jamie Bell and Thandie Newton, had a most exciting buzz going for it, mostly due to its all-star cast, Tony Timpone's vocal enthusiasm preceding the screening and its interesting if familiar premise. A couple whose relationship is falling apart decide to retreat themselves to an isolated island somewhere in Europe. As they vaguely attempt to solve their problems and expose dark secrets, the couple's already dysfunctional existence is disrupted further when a mysterious man washes ashore. Carrying a gun, an aggressive sense of entitlement and quite the bad news, he informs them that a plague has wiped out Europe's population—or is it the world's?—and that unless they stay exactly where they are and seal themselves in, they will succumb.

Unsurprisingly, *RETREAT* quickly evolves from a remote-location thriller to a home-invasion narrative with hints of bio-terrorism and end-of-the-world paranoia. Martin (Murphy) and Kate (Newton) find themselves pitted against the stranger (Bell), and their struggle for power in the household becomes the plot's main concern. Starting off with great promise, good actors and an appealing *mise-en-scène* that makes great use of the weather to add significant tension to the already uncomfortable situation between the two leads, the film quickly becomes muddled with completely inept characterizations, which become increasingly insufferable as *RETREAT*'s conflict escalades.

Arguably the film's fatal problem is that Tibbetts and co-writer Janice Hallett do virtually nothing to create an emotional bond between the spectator and the victims, but rather incite the audience's apathy by consistently having their characters make logic-defying decisions that will have you shouting at the screen with frustration. Viewer identification is key in survival-horror films such as these (see the recently reviewed Fantasia pick *A LONELY PLACE TO DIE*), because when thrown into the midst of a paranoia-based narrative such as *RETREAT*'s, one wants to have someone to relate to, cheer for and wish to survive. Unfortunately, Martin and Kate do not provide an iota of likability, coming off as two of most unnecessarily bland characters I've seen in a long time—and when the film escalates to its climax and the twist is revealed, one is well beyond any attempt at sympathizing. In fact, when the conflict finally implodes and the movie ends—not that it's particularly long either—I couldn't help a sigh of relief.

Production-wise, the film looks great, but can't justify the gaping logic holes—in both character and plot. Without true stakes and interesting characters, the narrative falls flat, and *RETREAT* comes off as one of the most disappointing films of this year's festival. I'm sure some will find some value in *RETREAT*'s dragging narrative, but there are far more engaging films within the many genres this one mixes together.

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BLEAK NIGHT

It’s not a genre film at all, and perhaps not one I should be writing about on the Fango blog, but I still feel like briefly stating this: BLEAK NIGHT is easily one of the strongest films I have seen this year, and perhaps the most impressive debut feature since Guillermo del Toro’s CRONOS (one of my favorite first films of all time). Newcomer Sung Hyun-yoon crafts an overwhelmingly intimate look at boyhood, teenage friendship and male camaraderie, through the investigation of the suicide of Ki-tae (played by “king of K-pop” Lee Je-hoo). Hyun-yoon takes us on a fragmented journey that is first and foremost the staggeringly emotional and exhausting character study of a trio of friends. A film I most certainly need to see again—I wasn’t 100 percent awake for the screening and missed a lot of subtleties, but that’s the festival lifestyle for you—BLEAK NIGHT is an amazingly raw, naturalistic suicide drama and an incredible discovery. Independent Korean cinema shows great promise—as evidenced by films such as DAYTIME DRINKING or Dahci Ma’s hauntingly uncomfortable experimental short GHOST, which preceded this screening—and BLEAK NIGHT is a prime example. A shattering and challenging film you should absolutely discover. Please seek it out!



ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF EVIL

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There’s something about mockumentaries I just can’t resist. A generally tired and repetitive subgenre, yet one I still relate to in ways I can’t explain myself, and every time I can catch a new one, I will. I also love seeing the various degrees of success with which filmmakers manage to (re)create reality and incite suspension of disbelief. *THE TROLL HUNTER*, which played two days before, was a marvelous example, and I was excited to see how *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF EVIL*—also part of the Playback in Black: The Next Wave spotlight (a follow-up to the Playback in Black section that introduced North American audiences to the horrors of [REC] and HOME MOVIE back in 2008)—would tackle the chilling question: What if Hitler had survived the war? Furthermore...what if he was behind some of America’s most important historical events?

Going into *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF EVIL* expecting a deadpan, seriously played piece of alternate history is a mistake, because Erik Eger and Magnus Oliv’s movie is as comedic as *faux* journalism can get. Made for next-to-no money, it accumulates goofy jokes and clever twists of historical revisionism, while succeeding in its concept with a sheer dose of inventiveness and enthusiasm.

Some friends of mine expressed disappointment at the film’s one-note joke and comedic aspect, but getting past that is quite easy, mostly due to Jon Rekdal’s endearing performance as Skule, whom aspiring and obsessively passionate filmmakers and geeks will most certainly relate to. *ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF EVIL* runs a very short 80 minutes, and offers enough giggles to warrant a watch. WWII connoisseurs will smirk at the historical accuracies, composited footage and premise, while conspiracy-theory buffs should have a fun time with the film’s narrative. Not a game-changer, but an earnest piece of entertainment.



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THE WICKER TREE

Based on writer/director Robin Hardy's own novel COWBOYS FOR CHRIST, THE WICKER TREE plays out as a slightly altered retelling of the events of his previous THE WICKER MAN, this time around following ex-trailer-trash pop singer Beth Boothby (Britannia Nicol) and her stereotypical cowboy fiancé Steve (Henry Garrett), both born-again Christians looking to convert the deadly pagans of Tressock. I should preface this by noting that THE WICKER MAN holds for me none of the emotional value it does for horror fans who grew up in the '70s, and in fact, having seen THE WICKER MAN only a few days ago, I went into WICKER TREE with a totally fresh perspective and none of the expectations and feelings longtime fans might have had, feelings which might have led to some leniency in terms of critical appreciation.

Regardless, and by most standards, THE WICKER TREE is a very unfortunate film to sit through, and fails on its own and as a follow-up to the 1973 classic. More precisely, it works almost exclusively as a reflection of its predecessor, playing out like a skin-curling parody and updating themes and imagery for a new generation. Stripped of the moral resonance of THE WICKER MAN with dumb humor and movie-of-the-week aesthetic sensibilities, this "spiritual" sequel is amusing at times, but mostly painful in the way it revises the narrative of the original in an awkwardly overbearing comedic manner. I can only imagine the frustration that die-hard WICKER MAN fans must have felt, and I'm happy I caught a glimpse of it on the sidewalk in front of the theater, as I discussed the film with older friends and teachers, whose silent frustration and disconcertment was apparent.

In its obvious desire to be uncomfortably modern and its derivative nature (both evidenced by the use of pop songs, THE SIMPSONS references, the almost exact plot reproduction and the half-assed attempt at environmental commentary), THE WICKER TREE retains hints of the moral ambiguity and commentary of its originator, but ultimately has no reason for being. Yet during the Q&A, Hardy informed the audience he's prepping a third film. Make of that what you will.

