

Fango Flashback: “RAWHEAD REX”

Written by Allan Dart
Sunday, 23 May 2010 19:16



It all starts with the peeing scene. A pagan, pre-Christian monster excreting on a verger...

“The Coot heard the splashing; he stepped closer and saw the giant was directing a glistening rope of its urine onto Declan’s upturned face. It splashed into his slackly opened mouth, it ran over his torso. The gleam of joy didn’t leave Declan’s eyes for a moment as he received this baptism, indeed he turned his head from side to side in his eagerness to be totally defiled.”

Clive Barker wrote that indelibly obscene passage in his brutally, bestially brilliant BOOKS OF BLOOD short story “Rawhead Rex.” Unfortunately, the 1986 film adaptation gets that scene—and many others—wrong. However, there’s something about George Pavlou’s botched RAWHEAD REX that permits me to forgive this messy film its many trespasses.

Pavlou first collaborated with Barker on TRANSMUTATIONS (a.k.a. UNDERWORLD), and if you think RAWHEAD REX has more than its fair share of peccadilloes, just take a look at that 1985 misguided memento of slipshod cinema. Barker co-wrote that film (which he subsequently disowned), and on RAWHEAD, the screenwriting neophyte got his first sole screenplay credit. This would be Barker and Pavlou’s last collaboration (Barker, again, wasn’t pleased with the picture). Pavlou directed one more movie in ’93 and subsequently left the feature filmmaking world to direct and produce commercials, corporate films and documentaries. I’m not exactly mourning the loss. RAWHEAD REX? This movie should be called RIDICULOUS REX. Still, for reasons I’ll explain, I remain fond of this often risible misfire.



For the most part, the film follows Barker’s short story as far as the plot goes. Set in an Irish hamlet, it wastes no time introducing the titular toothy titan, who is unleashed when a farmer

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clearing his land of stones for sowing purposes accidentally awakens and releases the roaring Rex (complete with hokey dark skies and lightning) while trying to remove the gargantuan rock that was keeping Rawhead trapped beneath the Earth. The farmer is the first to feel the violent, sanguinary wrath of the big-mawed behemoth, and the plot essentially becomes a monster-amok saga, with Rawhead indiscriminately dismembering, mauling and murdering the hamlet’s horrified denizens.

The main characters are Howard Hallenback (ROSE RED’s David Dukes), his wife and two kids. Howard’s a writer-historian doing research for his book on sacred sites in Ireland, especially concerning Neolithic sites and fertility cults. I won’t spoil how Howard crosses paths with Rawhead, but he spends the rest of the movie pursuing the beast while also trying to get the skeptical police to believe his story of an ancient god tearing up the countryside. The side stories include the townspeople’s insistence on silence when it comes to certain “secrets” about their local history, and one involving the Church and the aforementioned verger, who falls under Rawhead’s spell.



While I like RAWHEAD REX (again, I swear, I’ll give my reasons), the movie is absolutely inferior to Barker’s excellent short story. The latter has subtext and goes inside Rawhead’s head. The movie, however, is strictly one-dimensional, and Rawhead’s character, motivation and backstory are either simplified or simply don’t exist. Barker’s source material delved into paganism clashing with Christianity, old gods vs. new, the fecund and fertile powers of females—all in a style as raw and savage as his brutish King with the insatiable blood thirst. Pavlou’s film has none of that. But it does have a slew of other shortcomings. Here are just a few:

Pavlou is a bad director with no sense of composition, and I’ll get to his bungling of the Rawhead and FX scenes in a second. REX is awkwardly filmed and poorly paced, and Pavlou obviously doesn’t know how to get good performances out of his actors. Dukes and his co-stars are flat and dull, and Ronan Wilmot goes embarrassingly over the top as the crazed man of the cloth. There are also endless, awful scenes of people screaming and/or pumping their fists in the air during/after their encounters with Rex. And the optical FX (the glowing red hands and altar-candle visions) are laughably dated—even for 1986.

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But the biggest blunder—and, finally, the reason why RAWHEAD REX is a guilty pleasure for me—is Rex himself. Red- and cross-eyed. Furrowed brow. Receding hairline. Those huge choppers and colossal jaws. Not to mention that Ricardo Montalban/WRATH OF KHAN muscular chest and his mohawk mullet. I remember reading Fango as a kid and getting super-psyched over the Rawhead photos. He looked like he could be one of the greatest horror monsters of all time. And then I saw the film. And how Pavlou shot Rawhead in the worst possible way. Rawhead doesn't look real or scary. He appears phony, rubbery and silly. His head is a second-rate Halloween mask, stiff and inflexible. Sure, the FX team is to blame, but come on, Georgie, how about hiding Mr. Rex's rigidity in some shadows?



That, above all, is why RAWHEAD REX is a bad film. If you can't sell the monster, you can't sell the film. But that's also the twisted reason why I enjoy REX. Pavlou shamelessly (and in daylight, too!) shows off his primeval predator, Kentucky waterfall and all. It's imprudent audacity at its worst—and finest. I completely understand the film's detractors, but rewatching this film some 23 years later, I opprobriously must admit that I love its very badness. Hey, bad REX is better than no REX at all.

{jcomments on}