What's not quite a vampire and not quite a zombie? It's the star of THE REVENANT, which is not your usual vampire or zombie movie either. Imaginatively grisly and unconventionally funny, it's a full-blooded mix of horror and comedy that never stops shocking and surprising you, and a small triumph for writer/director D. Kerry Prior.

In THE REVENANT (opening in theaters today from Paladin and Lightning Entertainment), David Anders plays Bart, a young soldier killed during the Gulf War who comes back to a sort of life after his body is shipped home to Los Angeles. His best buddy Joey (Chris Wylde) is at first perplexed by Bart's resurrection, but he's soon doing his best to help his pal sate his newfound thirst for blood—which involves going on nighttime quests to kill and drain assorted LA criminals. For Prior, previously a visual FX artist on the PHANTASM sequels, THE ABYSS, BUBBA HO-TEP and others, the release of THE REVENANT (reviewed here) is the end of a three-year post-completion journey that began with the movie's festival premiere in 2009, the first of many showcases around the world where it has picked up applause and awards. Now, a wider audience will finally be able to sample its many dark delights.

FANGORIA: Can you tell us about THE REVENANT's long trip to theaters—what caused the delay, and how did it finally achieve release?

D. KERRY PRIOR: I don't know—the confluence of various events, I guess. It's hard to get distribution, you know? I know that once we got into negotiating, it could sometimes take four or five months to even negotiate a contract, just to have it fall through. I get the impression that there was something that scared people a little bit about the movie—the narrative, the political overtones or the social commentary, or the dildo scene…

FANG: It is a very ambitious film, and wide-ranging in the themes it covers. Did you have any misgivings about tackling all those subjects in one movie?

PRIOR: No, I wouldn't say that. Going into it, I didn't look at it as being exceptionally expansive; I was just trying to tell the story that appealed to me. The more I dug into the narrative of Bart and Joey and who he was and where he was from, these things kind of happened. So by the time we were ready to shoot it, it all seemed natural, like it was part of the story, and that was how it should be.

FANG: Did you start out with the characters, or with the story and themes you wanted to explore?

PRIOR: I definitely started with the characters. Actually, backing up, it started with the premise—what if vampires were real? I kind of looked at it as, what if my friend came to the door, having risen from the dead; how would I deal with that? We all recognize that Bram Stoker is fiction and Anne Rice is fiction, and movies are all fictional, so you'd have to go back to the source to figure out how to handle this. And as you go back and get into the research, there's all this folklore about people rising from the dead and tottering about, tormenting their friends and loved ones. And then, when they'd go to investigate what was going on, they'd disinter the grave, and if the corpse was rotting they'd go, "Well, that was obviously a mistake," but if the corpse appeared to not be rotting—which apparently some of them did—then obviously they were onto something, and the solution was to chop off the head, drive a stake through the heart.

So based on that folklore, I started creating the character of Bart, and then it became about, OK, where did he come from, how did he die? And that's when the themes about the Gulf War came up. From the beginning, I wanted to use vampirism as a metaphor—and it's not like that hasn't been done before, but I wanted every character in the movie to be a bloodsucker on some level, feeding off of other characters. And somehow, American involvement in the Middle East seemed to fit right into that.

FANG: The movie touches on not only those political themes, but vigilantism as well. Was that something you wanted to make a statement about?

PRIOR: Well, I think one of the characters in the movie is Los Angeles, and part of the absurdity of the situation comes from taking this ancient curse or affliction or magic or whatever it is, and dropping that into the modern city of Los Angeles, and what's going to happen there? And it's pretty difficult to tell a story about Los Angeles without talking on some level about crime. And certainly, you can't even touch on crime in LA without it being sort of an ignition point for a discussion on racism. Having lived there through the whole Rodney King situation and all that stuff, I find all that fascinating, and it seemed like a natural part of what this story was about.

FANG: You achieved a very interesting balance between horror and comedy in THE REVENANT. How did you approach that?

PRIOR: Well, again, that wasn't self-conscious. The absurdity of the situation just seemed to naturally give way to that. I think the comedy was kind of teased to the surface the more seriously the characters took the situation, and the more seriously I took the characters in the narrative. Because on a certain level, if your friend really were to come to your door, asking for your help finding blood [*laughs*]—how could your response not be comedic, you know?

FANG: The basic premise is similar to Bob Clark's DEATHDREAM; did you take any inspiration from that film?

PRIOR: You know, I still have not seen that movie! A lot of people mention it and have compared THE REVENANT to DEATHDREAM, but I've never seen it.

FANG: How did you arrive at the two actors you cast as your leads?

PRIOR: The casting was a long and arduous process. We went out with offers to a lot of actors, and, as is the process, got turned down. We were in that starting phase, that Catch-22 of not being able to get funding unless you have an actor, and not being able to get an actor unless you have funding to pay them and make an offer. David Anders had actually come in to audition for the role of Joey, and it didn't seem like that worked, and at the time we were still putting out offers for someone to play Bart. Then at a certain point, Leah Mangum, our casting director, said, "What about David Anders as Bart?" So we brought him back in and talked to him, and it felt like his whole presence and persona had enough gravity; he seemed like sort of an intense guy. So we went back and forth with him for a while, and finally landed him.

Then it was a matter of rethinking Joey, because it was like a puzzle, trying to put all these characters together, and I knew the movie was only going to work if I could make all those relationships work. We were about to launch into another casting session to find Joey, and at the last minute I said to Liam Finn, one of the producers, "Why don't we go talk to this Chris Wylde guy?" He'd come in to audition once before and had given a good read, but we had considered pairing him with a different actor. So Liam and I met with Chris at a bar in Hollywood, and we were talking and he was cracking jokes and doing his usual shtick, and midway through, all of a sudden this guy got up from the bar, came over and said, "Aren't you Chris Wylde, the comedian?" And Chris was like, "Yeah." "Oh, man, I love you, you're the greatest thing ever! I need to have your autograph," blah blah blah… To this day, I'm convinced that was some pal of Chris' that he had come in there just to influence the meeting! But in any case, we walked away, and we hadn't even gotten in the car when I said to Liam, "That's the guy—that's Joey."

We knew Chris was funny—he's hilarious—but when he and David met, they just fell in love. They just adored each other right from the beginning. And honestly, they're both great actors, but it's their friendship that really comes through, and that's genuine. They're still pals, and they still hang out together, and when you get them together you can't shut them up! That friendship is real, and that's really the magic that makes the characters work, and makes the movie work.

TO BE CONTINUED