

“30 DAYS OF NIGHT: DARK DAYS” (Blu-ray Review)

Written by Glen Baisley

Sunday, 03 October 2010 14:13



The original 30 DAYS OF NIGHT movie was a breath of fresh air. At the time of its release, there hadn't been a good down-and-dirty vampire flick in quite some time, and this one embraced the primal nature of the lore and gave us plenty of fangs and blood, with no sunlit-glittering vamps to be found. It was also fairly faithful to the original Steve Niles/Ben Templesmith comics, with the exception of a few small subplots—and in this writer's opinion, the film improved upon their human drama. So it should come as no surprise that the follow-up series 30 DAYS OF NIGHT: DARK DAYS would go before the cameras too—and unfortunately, it is a dark day indeed for this direct-to-disc sequel.

The DARK DAYS comics did an excellent job of setting up lead character Stella (widow of the original's deceased sheriff Eben) as the bad-ass Sarah Connor of the vampire world. The film version excises some of that action to get right to the point, and suffers for it later. The movie begins a year after the massacre in Barrow, Alaska, and we discover that Stella (LOST's Kiele Sanchez, replacing the original's Melissa George) has been a busy girl. She has written a book about the Barrow tragedy and travels around the country, lecturing about the hidden world of vampires. The opening setpiece does provide a promising setup: To convince skeptics that the bloodsuckers exist, Stella reveals them during her a lecture by turning UV lights onto the audience. Like Rice Krispies, a couple of the attendees go snap, crackle and pop. It's a brilliant opening—if you suspend disbelief that she could have written and published a book and engaged the resources for such an elaborate exhibition in such a short amount of time.



After this event, Stella is enlisted by vampire hunters to seek out and destroy the new undead queen, Lilith (Mia Kirshner). The original 30 DAYS OF NIGHT comics featured a mother-and-son team working together to document the existence of vampires, with the mother later teaming with Stella to aid her on her quest in DARK DAYS; 30 DAYS also included another ghoul, Vicente, whose murder becomes the focal point of Lilith's revenge in the sequel. Rather than attempt to stay true to the source material—which could have easily been accomplished in

“30 DAYS OF NIGHT: DARK DAYS” (Blu-ray Review)

Written by Glen Baisley

Sunday, 03 October 2010 14:13

the film sequel with minor changes to the character relationships—the DARK DAYS movie’s script (credited to Niles himself and director Ben Ketai) departs from it as the film progresses. What follows is a generic story with flat characters set in an uninspired locale.

I’m not sure what home town director Ben Ketai hails from, but the last time I checked, southern California wasn’t the desolate landscape he depicts it to be in DARK DAYS; it seems even less populated than Barrow. There’s also entirely too much sunshine in this movie. What kept you on the edge of your seat in the first film was how desperate the perpetual-darkness situation was. There was nowhere to run: If the cold didn’t get you, then the creatures waiting in the darkness would.

That brings me to the vamps themselves. Like their human opponents, the bloodsuckers lack any sense of personality—with the exception of the only good vampire, Dane (Ben Cotton), who is the most interesting yet underused character. Sanchez does all right with the material she is given, but the same can’t be said for Kirshner, who gives her nemesis Lilith no sense of menace at all. There were so many great moments with Danny Huston’s evil Marlow in the first film, but not one standout moment to speak of for the sequel’s villainess. The creature makeup even falls short this time; there are some good gore gags to perk up your attention, but in the end, they’re not enough to distract from the movie’s flat pacing.

The climax is just as much a letdown as the action that proceeds it, considering how nicely the comics reached their conclusion. The only thing the two versions share is the final scene, which leaves the door open for yet another sequel. Even judged apart from its source material, 30 DAYS OF NIGHT: DARK DAYS is rather boring—we’ve seen it all before—but the fact that it was inspired by such a well-regarded comic makes it all the more disappointing.

The Blu-ray (which comes packaged with a DVD copy) at least sports a widescreen transfer that’s a perfect match for the tone of the film’s visuals, and the 5.1 DTS-HD soundscape is terrific, especially considering it’s a direct-to-video sequel. Exclusive to the Blu-ray is “Graphic Inspirations: Comic to Film Exploration,” a seven-part featurette that clocks in at around 10 minutes and is narrated by Ketai. He discusses how tricky it was to incorporate all of the comics’ elements and how some of the characters had to undergo changes, noting that he decided to hone in on Stella at the expense of other portions of the story. (His admission and justification of such glaring departures from the source material—which he elaborates on further in the disc commentary—is refreshing; it’s admirable that he defends himself, no matter how unfortunate his choices may seem to the viewer.) Ketai recalls his talks with Niles about the vampire-hunting crew; they were established at the outset in the comics, but they pair decided that having Stella meet them for the first time in the film would provide more of a story arc. Similar reasons are

“30 DAYS OF NIGHT: DARK DAYS” (Blu-ray Review)

Written by Glen Baisley

Sunday, 03 October 2010 14:13

given for the changes in Dane: Ketai wanted to explore what it's like to be a vampire with a soul who's rejected by both humans and the undead.

Visible on both the Blu-ray and DVD is “The Gritty Realism of DARK DAYS,” a 10-minute featurette featuring members of the cast and crew. Ketai here focuses on the visual side, noting that it was important to keep the movie in the same “world” as its screen predecessor while also maintaining the comics' tone. He and Geoff Wallace, the production designer, note the contrast in color palette to the first film (much of the sequel has a bleached- and burned-out look) and how they wanted to reflect the stark imagery of the printed page while bringing out the backgrounds that were often absent in them. On a lighter note, Kirshner admits that while she's not a queasy person, she found it hard not laugh because of how gross it was to have to kiss someone with a mouth full of blood.

Co-producer J.R. Young joins Ketai for a commentary on both discs. A frequent subject is the challenges of shooting on a tight budget and schedule, with the entire movies shot on various real locations, never on a stage. The hotel scenes were especially tough to shoot due to the amount of actors and crew that needed to be jammed into the small room, and a scene with Stella's FBI interrogation (the last one to be shot) required a sterile look—which worked out perfectly, considering the art department had run out of money. Ketai also admits that the set design for a few sequences, like the vampire attacks in the tunnels, were heavily influenced by ALIENS, and recalls with glee how a bit in which Harold Perrineau's head being smashed with a cinder block was shot in one take—even though the blow to the head with a *faux* block caused Perrineau some real pain.

Ketai concludes the commentary by revealing that the ending was completely reconceived a few days before they shot it, though the closing shot was retained to tie it back to the comic—and leave things open for another sequel. Let's hope that if 30 DAYS OF NIGHT: RETURN TO BARROW is lensed, the filmmakers are given a decent budget and don't drop the ball.

MOVIE: 🍅🍅🍅🍅

BLU-RAY PACKAGE: 🍅🍅🍅🍅

“30 DAYS OF NIGHT: DARK DAYS” (Blu-ray Review)

Written by Glen Baisley

Sunday, 03 October 2010 14:13

{comments on}