

Written by Chris Haberman

Wednesday, 19 January 2011 13:23

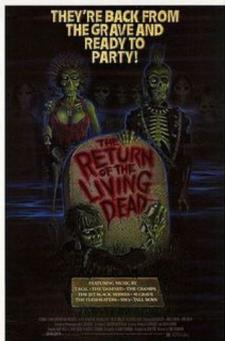
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Christian Sellers and Gary Smart’s book *THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD* just came out yesterday. Here’s Chris Haberman’s review of the film that started it all!

Hardcore fans of this one—and I know there are many—should skip to the last two paragraphs of this review and read from there. Those interested in why they should cough up a few more bucks for this Collector’s Edition reissue should proceed ahead.

Yes, this widely adored flick was (finally) released on DVD in 2002. And yes, a handful of that disc’s most satisfying features show up again here—not to mention the same 1.85:1 widescreen transfer and mono sound. That said, the new version has a few delicious surprises in store for those who find the ’80s pop-culture aspects of the film delicious.



A new cast and crew commentary is everything fans have wanted. Fun anecdotes and freaky secrets rise to the surface while we listen to the group, which includes Don (“Ernie”) Calfa, who is just as eccentric and intelligent as he has been described as in the past; Brian (“Scuz”) Peck, who enthusiastically recalls tons about the flick; Beverly (“Tina”) Randolph, who is as perky and sweet as her character in the film; Linnea (“Trash”) Quigley, who reveals everything anyone would wanna know about her graveyard striptease; Allan (“Tarman”) Trautman, who is still proud of his unnerving and hysterical performance; and production designer William Stout, who always has great tales to tell from the set. Along the way, tons of great rocks are turned over—anybody interested in the flick shouldn’t miss this.

*The Dead Have Risen* is a new 20-minute featurette featuring Clu Gulager, James Karen, Thom Matthews, Peck, Calfa, Trautman, Randolph, and Quigley. It’s here that fans will gain sincere

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answers to questions they’ve always wondered. Does everyone still have great memories from the shoot? Yes, they do. Do Gulager and Karen feel respect for their work on such a film, after maintaining careers devoted to films of all genres? Yes, they do. Is Randolph still as cute as she used to be? Yes, she is. In all seriousness, if fans watch this before soaking in the cast/crew commentary, they’ll be riveted to the point of wanting more. This featurette should be seen first, and the commentary heard second.

*The Decade of Darkness* is a fun little 22-minute documentary about the genre’s journey through the ’80s—from slasher flicks to horror/comedies to supernatural endeavors. Though the running time doesn’t permit the docu to dig too deep, on-camera comments from authority figures like Joe Dante, Stuart Gordon, Elvira, John Landis, Bill Moseley, Trautman, Tom Holland, Catherine Hicks and Fango’s own Tony Timpone are fun enough to make viewers wish the segment was twice as long.

English, Spanish and “Zombie” subtitle selections are also offered. Uh, yeah...“Zombie” subtitles. With this option selected, no words appear on the bottom of your screen until a ghoul grunts or shrieks. It is then that you’ll see green translations (“Arrrrgh!”, “Raaaar!”) appear. Do yourself a favor—check this function out.

A fine commentary from the 2002 DVD remains, with director Dan O’Bannon and Stout talking us through most aspects of pre- and postproduction in addition to other intriguing stories. Another remnant from the debut disc is the *Designing the Dead* featurette with Stout and O’Bannon quickly carrying us through conceptual and preparation history. This segment should provide some kicks for those who haven’t picked up the prior release, thanks to the inclusion of Stout’s EC Comics-inspired illustrations. A few trailers round out the disc, two of which are “bloody” and “bloodier” variations.



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The only thing dampening my reaction is that unacceptably generic cover art, which contributed heavily to the half-skull demerit in the DVD package’s rating. When a genre flick filled with so many wildly recognizable images gets stuck on shelves looking like a bag of Wal•Mart Halloween candy, it’s enough to make the hair bristle. I didn’t expect the theatrical poster on there, but c’mon... If they had simply slapped Stout’s splattery red title design from the opening credits against a black background (how classy would that have been??), I wouldn’t be making a peep. Granted, I may be making too big a deal out of this—indeed, a talented artist I know tried to convince me that brand new art was necessary for such a release—and fortunately, that really is the only gripe to be made about the Collector’s Edition.

RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD wasn’t perfect when released, nor has time aged it well enough for it to be considered perfect today. Regardless, it’s had those four skulls comin’ to it. Consider for a moment how much bang for the buck many have enjoyed over the years with this one: seasoned character actors, working on fabulously art-directed sets rife with inspired production design, great gore gags that shock when pulled off right and outrage (in a good way) when they don’t quite work (and several don’t) and a script audacious enough to break every revered Romero rule and avoid taking itself too seriously even though the characters themselves treat it as serious as a heart attack.



Then there are the zombies. Zombies that can run, leap and climb. Zombies that can scream, talk and negotiate. Zombies that remember how to lie, cheat and set traps. And the damned things simply will...not...die. No power tool, machete or gun can stop them. You could try burning them, but for each you roast, you create thousands more. Enough has been written about the film in the past for me to stop the praise here; I’ve said my piece about the skulls. And in doing so, I feel that I have tapped into the spirit of the film’s most devoted of fans—that strange sensation of wanting to skip out of my office while lighting a cigarette, grab a drink from the kitchen, somersault downstairs and watch the whole damn movie again for the thousandth time while singing along with the soundtrack at the absolute top of my lungs.

(And be sure to pick up a copy of FANGORIA #301—out next month—for our interview with ROTL actress Linnea Quigley, plus our review of THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD.

## Fresh from the Archives: "THE RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD" Collector's Edition (DVD review)

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MOVIE: 

DVD PACKAGE: 

{comments on}