

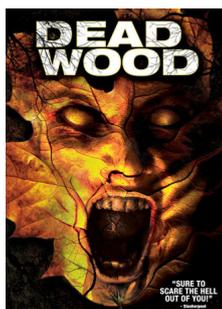
Fresh from the Archives: "DEAD WOOD" (DVD Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Wednesday, 20 July 2011 11:16



Making its world premiere tonight at Montreal's [Fantasia festival](#), David Bryant's *VICTIMS* is an ambitious single-take thriller about a man's mysterious abduction. It's the solo directorial debut for Bryant, who previously served as part of the three-filmmaker team behind 2007's *DEAD WOOD*; see Michael Gingold's previous review of the DVD below.

DEAD WOOD is a rather risky title to put on movie belonging to a subgenre (kids go to the woods...kids get dead, to borrow the title of a recent satire/homage to the form) that has seen plenty of dead wood of its own. This particular example, crafted by three British film-school pals, doesn't blaze any trails of originality, but the movie—and especially the special features on Lionsgate's DVD—suggests that as fledgling feature-makers, they're on the right path.



Following the expected opening teaser in which a hapless victim (David Bryant, who scripted *DEAD WOOD* and directed, produced, photographed and edited it with Sebastian Smith and Richard Stiles) meets his maker, we're introduced to our vanful of protagonists. Webb (Fergus March) and Larri (Emily Juniper) are an established couple, while their weekend camping trip is something of a blind date for her cousin Milk (John Samuel Worsey) and friend Jess (Rebecca Craven). Their scenes together are lower-key than usual for this sort of film, and while there's nothing terribly memorable about any of the characters, they're easy enough to spend time with. Their drive up does have a rude interruption when they hit a deer on the road, and Webb has to put it out of its misery; this may be the offense that leads them to bigger trouble later, though the movie is pleasingly ambiguous about any specific connection.

Rather than a human or semihuman stalker, it's a deadly supernatural presence that ultimately threatens the quartet, in the manner of *THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT*. In fact, quite a bit of *DEAD WOOD* is very much in the manner of *BLAIR WITCH*, with a few ominous zooms through the trees that are very *EVIL DEAD*. When an Asian girl (Nina Kwok), who claims to be looking for her missing boyfriend—the prologue victim—turns up at the friends' campsite and inevitably proves to have threatening ulterior motives, there are echoes of Far East fright fare as well. All the familiarity doesn't breed contempt, exactly, but it prevents *DEAD WOOD* from

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achieving the impact it might have. At its best, it engenders a quiet chill and builds a palpable lost-in-the-middle-of-nowhere atmosphere in places, while even the “biggest” frights are subtle ones, with a minimum of makeup FX and just a few CGI scares (albeit well-wrought ones for the tiny budget).

The project’s digitally lensed origins result in a picture (presented in anamorphic 1.78:1 widescreen) that’s a tad soft and flat, though undue slickness might have worked against the simplicity of its storytelling; the Dolby Digital 5.1 audio is equally unemphatic, but gets the job done. A second track contains a commentary by Bryant, Smith and Stiles that reveals just how grassroots DEAD WOOD was; often working as the only crew, the trio took four years to put the movie together, thanks to casting snafus (they lost all but one of their leads two weeks before the first shoot), the necessity of extensive reshoots and an extreme amount of postproduction, with almost all of the sound and dialogue redone after the fact. Yet their discussion also reveals their stick-to-it-iveness, as well as their ingenuity in dealing with issues they didn’t expect and that the average viewer might not consider. For example, to capture shots in which Webb, driving the van, keeps taking his eyes off the road, the filmmakers had him sit in the front passenger seat with a fake steering wheel, and flipped the image.

The frustration and perseverance of this team is in even greater evidence in the 35-minute “DEAD WOOD Diaries” documentary. From dubious start (no one shows up for the initial day of auditions, and the first shoot, way back in 2003, gets rained out) to triumphant finish (the screening of the completed feature, of which Stiles says they “pulled it back from the dead”), every facet of the production is covered with a true you-are-there feeling. There are any number of fun little revelations—including one putting the lie to the scene that turns up in DEAD WOOD and every film like it, as one of the gang is able to get cell-phone reception in the middle of the woods to order food for the cast and crew.

A selection of deleted footage (with optional commentary by the trio) is largely concerned with glimpses of the characters in their London lives before their ill-fated vacation; it’ll be up to the individual viewer to decide whether these snippets, which offer a little more insight into the protagonists’ personalities but don’t quite fit the tone of the bulk of the movie, were rightly or wrongly removed. There’s also an alternate ending that pays off Jess’ trimmed introduction and has the right spirit, but doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. The bonus features are topped off with outtakes that aren’t especially funny and special FX comparisons that present a few moments with and without CG augmentation, but don’t demonstrate the process in between.

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