The new year is upon us, fellow Fangorians—a time of new beginnings, new experiences and, for some of us, new straight-to-DVD movies to review. However, rather like the morning after a night spent guzzling cheap champagne, THE HUNTERS (Lionsgate) is a bad hangover of a movie, starring Steve Waddington (SLEEPY HOLLOW, LAST OF THE MOHICANS) and GLEE’s Dianna Agron, along with Chris Briant, who also directed.

THE HUNTERS is the story of four friends who are miserably stuck in their everyday, run-of-the-mill lives. Waddington plays Ronny, a likable family man who’s having trouble acknowledging his dark side. His best friend Oliver (Tony Becker, resembling a younger Mike Ditka here) is a computer repairman who takes crap from his superiors and ignores his wife. The only place these two men and their two younger buddies (Jay Brown and Xavier Delambre) are truly at home is when they’re hunting at Fort Goben, a forbidding structure of cold stone and moss surrounded by dark woods. Meanwhile, police station bureaucrat Le Saint (Briant) and a young couple about to go to college (Agron and Philip Correia) also somehow wind up at the mysterious fort, where all hell is about to break loose.

What follows is a confusing mess of a film with little to no narrative structure and shoddy character development. While there’s an interesting twist or two, the script by Michael Lehman (no relation to the HEATHERS director) is so scatterbrained that whatever impact they might

have had is lost. The characters are poorly written; one minute they’re sane, the next they’re psychotic, while others leave at the beginning of the film only to pop up toward the end for no reason. Case in point: Agron has maybe five minutes of screen time, even though her pretty face dominates the DVD cover in an attempt to lure potential viewers with the ol’ bait-and-switch routine (some things never change). It’s as if the filmmakers couldn’t decide on whose story to tell or which leads to focus on, so they just threw it all together, creating an uneven cut-and-paste job.

One character who seemingly can’t get enough screen time—not surprisingly given who plays him—is Le Saint. Though Briant kind of resembles a French Jamie Kennedy, he does a serviceable job in the role. However, the very last scene is unintentionally hilarious with its self-referencing credit cue, leading one to believe that Briant fancies himself a real bad-ass. While THE HUNTERS is beautifully shot by DP John B. Aronson (whose credits include TV’s HEROES, AMERICAN HORROR STORY and the new RED TAILS), his talents are, for the most part, wasted here. Some of the violence is gruesome and effective, but the gunfights are ridiculous—for instance, when bullets hit trees, they spark, leaving you with flashbacks of a bad WALKER, TEXAS RANGER episode.

The DVD’s making-of segment proves more interesting than the movie itself, showing the camaraderie among the cast and crew, particularly the hunters. At one point, Waddington goes on about how great he thought the screenplay was, leading one to speculation that either the shooting script was changed dramatically, or that the actor’s brains are still fried from the time he got burned alive by Huron tribesmen before Daniel Day-Lewis showed up. The actors are all likable here, even star/director Briant, who talks about the “connection” he felt with Agron after his initial meeting with the actress. (He’s French, what can ya do?) There’s no commentary here to let the filmmakers clue us in on what went wrong, only this featurette that makes one wish the movie were better.

To sum up, THE HUNTERS is a mind-numbing mess that aims for the bull’s-eye but doesn’t even hit the target, leaving viewers scratching their heads and wanting their 111 minutes (!) back. Perhaps Jean-Claude Van Damme said it best in the far superior action classic HARD TARGET: “Hunting season…is over.”

MOVIE: 💀💀💀💀

DVD PACKAGE: 💀💀💀💀