

“STAKE LAND” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold

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Jim Mickle and Nick Damici ably beat the sophomore jinx with STAKE LAND (playing tonight at Lincoln Center’s Walter Reade Theater as part of the Scary Movies 4 series, with more festival dates to come and theatrical release scheduled next year via Dark Sky Films), paying off on the promise of their impressive debut feature MULBERRY STREET. Once more chronicling the struggle of a small group of people to survive against ravenous ghouls, the duo once again demonstrate that the humans matter more than the creatures when it comes to genre storytelling.

STAKE LAND is much bigger and yet more intimate than MULBERRY STREET; like this week’s standout release MONSTERS (see review [here](#)), it’s a compelling road movie first and foremost, though it also contains many moments of shocking and savage vampire action. Director Mickle and star Damici’s script opens with the U.S. having already crumbled before a nationwide onslaught of the bloodsuckers, leaving only dwindling pockets of humanity to survive however they can. One of the hardiest survivors is a man known only as Mister (Damici), who rescues a teenager named Martin (Connor Paolo) from the creatures that have slaughtered the boy’s family.



Martin, who narrates the film, becomes Mister’s traveling companion and protégé in vampire-slaying, and his maturation in the course of their adventures makes STAKE LAND a coming-of-age tale on top of its many genre elements. Beyond the horror of the bloodsuckers, there’s the postapocalyptic environment (with Mister as the Mad Max-esque hardened, all-business man of action) and heavy Western overtones as Mister and Martin stop off in what amount to beleaguered frontier towns and dodge ambushes out in the wilderness. Yet this is no

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mere pastiche; Mickle mixes his inspirations up into a film driven by its people instead of its homages.

And it's remarkable how well he does it with a minimum of dialogue. After the engagingly chatty apartment-house denizens of *MULBERRY STREET*, Mickle and Damici make a 180 here and present a group of protagonists who don't say much, and yet we get to know and care for them all the same. As they head north toward hoped-for safety in Canada, Mister and Martin are joined by a nun, Sister Anna (Kelly McGillis), and a pregnant young singer, Belle (Danielle Harris); later, they also pick up a Marine named Willie (Sean Nelson). Each of them has persevered through their own hell, and the performances ring with understated strength that engages our sympathy.

There are plenty of frightening obstacles they face that get us on their side as well. Beyond the hungry undead—and perhaps worse—are the Brotherhood, a band of religious fanatics who have taken advantage of the country's plight to seize any power they can, and enforce it in decidedly un-Christian ways. Their leader is Jebediah Loven (a vivid turn by Michael Cerveris), who becomes the central antagonist as he takes a personal interest in destroying Mister and his companions. One tactic the Brotherhood uses to assault a locked-down town where the group have taken refuge results in a stunning and scarifying setpiece, shot by Mickle and cinematographer Ryan Samul in one long, *CHILDREN OF MEN*-style take, that stands as the film's highlight.

Throughout *STAKE LAND*, Samul's widescreen images are striking, mixing beauty and desolation on a series of locations perfectly chosen to convey the sense of a blighted land, and lensed on and off over the better part of a year to capture an evocative feeling of passing time. While working on a low budget, Mickle and co. have made a film that feels as big as a studio picture; like their characters, the filmmakers have turned their modest means to their every advantage. Production and costume designers Daniel R. Kersting and Liz Vastola have created an impeccable scavenged society, while the creature and gore FX by Brian Spears and Peter Gerner are grisly and ghastly without becoming so splattery that they shatter the low-key mood. And as on all the recent films by Larry Fessenden's producing entity Glass Eye Pix, Jeff Grace's score provides rich and flavorful accompaniment.

STAKE LAND may be too deliberately paced for certain genre fans, and those seeking a gut-ripping alternative to the recent wimp-vampire trend are advised to alter their expectations. For while this movie's bloodsucking undead do deliver the goods, it's the living—and their struggles to stay that way—that provide the true beating heart of this quietly powerful film.

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