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Sadly, we live in the sort of times that encourage an influx of gloomy postapocalypse movies. Incessant global conflict tied in with mounting economic and environmental horror stories has the world’s future troublingly uncertain. Director Doug Aarniokoski’s THE DAY, which premiered at this year’s Toronto International Film Festival, is the latest pessimistic prognostication that aims to have viewers rushing out to stock up on munitions and canned goods.

After an unspecified event causes society as we know it to implode, flocks of scavengers roam deserted landscapes hunting for edibles and temporary refuge. THE DAY is 24 hours in the subsistent life of five of these scruffy survivors. The group is led by Rick (I SELL THE DEAD’s Dominic Monaghan), constantly searching for a safe place for himself and his makeshift family (Shawn Ashmore, Cory Hardrict, Shannyn Sossamon) to settle. Mary (Ashley Bell) is the group’s newest recruit, struggling to earn their trust while fighting alongside them. Stalked and harried across the bleak countryside by roving bandits, the exhausted five arrive at a crumbling, abandoned farmhouse and soon must contend with dangers from both inside the stronghold and out.

Don’t seek out THE DAY expecting some sort of innovative take on the future-dystopia genre. You’ll already be familiar with the basic plot and omnipresent cloud of danger from THE ROAD, the bleached, oversaturated photography from THE BOOK OF ELI, the nighttime farmhouse siege from NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (yep, it’s another “ragtag crew defending an enclosed locale against an evil mob” trip). Even a crumb of THE ROAD WARRIOR is incorporated via a lead baddie with a mohawk. Since nothing here comes off as particularly original, director Aarniokoski (who cut his filmic teeth shooting 2nd unit on a number of Robert Rodriquez’s movies) wisely expends his energy and running time on the interplay between his characters.

These scenes let THE DAY’s most compelling asset, the excellent and admirably committed cast, stretch and impress. Underrated Ashmore follows up his fine work in Adam Green’s FROZEN by tapping into emotional darkness once again for his role of a family man adrift in grief, yet the film is stolen outright by THE LAST EXORCISM’s Bell. The waifish actress has to be the most unexpectedly credible action heroine in years; her character Mary is a grotty, haggard and vulnerable alternative to the sterile and blowdried perfection of, say, Kate Beckinsale in the UNDERWORLD series. Bell’s emaciated, almost skeletal face (superb, subtle makeup job here) haunts the screen, and she makes sure every line of Mary’s limited dialogue holds a weary weight. Aarniokoski and screenwriter Luke Passmore engender a rare level of realism for female fighters by not having the slight, wispy girl easily overpower hordes of burly mesomorphic stuntmen; Bell is appropriately bounced and tossed around like chicken in a skillet, making her eventual victories feel that much more earned.

Shame, then, that many of the film’s manic action sequences are defaced by some tragically blotchy digital blood and weapons. Crap CGI is quickly becoming the modern equivalent of a boom mic drooping into frame; it startles the viewer out of the film, and here the effects are distractingly phony enough to cause the flow of some otherwise blood-pumping action to stutter.

U.S. distribution for THE DAY has been acquired by WWE Studios, no doubt based on the strength of the performances and Bell’s memorable star turn. If the company can somehow smuggle the film’s brutal but necessary violence past the MPAA (especially if they manage to keep a pulverizing kitchen confrontation between Ashmore and Bell intact), this will certainly be a DAY worth waiting for.