

“THE DEAD” (Film Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
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Zombies are a resilient bunch. In the second decade of their screen revival, the undead plague has spread across so many movies and TV shows that they've threatened to wear out their welcome—yet the right vehicle can still make them scary. On *THE WALKING DEAD*, they remain an effective threat (don't miss the second-season premiere this Sunday), and in the even more simply titled *THE DEAD*, the flesheaters retain the ability to make your flesh crawl.

Opening in limited theatrical release today, *THE DEAD* wins points at the outset by not being the umpteenth rehash of the trapped-in-a-confined-space scenario first established by, and never bettered since, George A. Romero's *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* and *DAWN OF THE DEAD*. Rather, it's the best example yet of what could be called the Third World Zombie subgenre that cropped up (generally overseas) in *DAWN*'s wake, in which the characters make their way through an uncivilized landscape teeming with the hungry corpses. Granted, it would be hard not to improve on the likes of Bruno Mattei's *HELL OF THE LIVING DEAD/NIGHT OF THE ZOMBIES*, but what writing/directing brothers Howard J. and Jonathan Ford have wrought pays off their crazily ambitious and often dangerous location shoot in Africa.



Right from the start, *THE DEAD* gives you the heebie-jeebies as it introduces its enemy in the (non-living) person of an African native zombie with a disfigured leg. Throughout the film, the Fords cast local villagers as their ghoul army, including a number with missing limbs and other physical damage, yet they manage to keep the tactic from coming off as exploitative. Nor does the narrative focus on a white protagonist battling legions of black zombies become a racist spectacle, since the Fords present this enemy as a simple inevitable product of the environment. There's certainly more than a touch of allegory and sociopolitical commentary going on here, but the Fords keep all that crawling under the surface of a vigorously told horror/adventure yarn.

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The aforementioned American is Lt. Brian Murphy (Rob Freeman), an Air Force engineer left stranded in the savannah by a plane crash (shown in judicious and vividly staged flashbacks). Making his way across the barren landscape, fleeing and fending off attacks by the undead, he is joined in his survival quest by another military man, Sgt. Daniel Dembele (Prince David Osei), who became separated from his son in the midst of the zombie outbreak and is committed to tracking the boy down. Through their struggles to find food and transport across the plains, and encounters with both the dead and the living (i.e. other armed and/or desperate survivors), the two form an inevitable bond that just might carry them safely to the end of their road.

The interracial-buddy trope has become as standard in genre cinema as zombies have, and works here thanks to the naturalistic approach of the Fords, who braved all kinds of hardships (see interview [here](#) and [here](#)) to get their independent epic on screen. The authenticity of the settings and the background players is THE DEAD’s greatest asset, establishing an overwhelming sense of a place where danger might well be lurking everywhere even if the dead weren’t coming back to life, and where there are so many of them that there’s no place to run even in the midst of wide open spaces. No night of the living dead, this story takes place under the bright, oppressive sun—which makes it all the more noteworthy that the prosthetic and digital gore FX come off so well. For this budget—or any budget, actually—the physical and CG gags are outstanding, and however many times you’ve seen flesh torn from bones and heads blasted or crushed, those moments here can still make you jump.

Relatable, believable heroes are also an asset in the movie like this, and on that note THE DEAD is mostly successful. Freeman is certainly physically well-suited to the role, and has the right look—blue eyes gazing hopefully ahead from his weathered face—but his dramatic moments are uneven. Osei fares better, conveying an unforced, grounded heroism born of the necessity of the horrific situation. The true heroes of THE DEAD, however, are the Fords, who soldiered through one of the toughest shoots imaginable and came out of the other end with a solid picture that mixes familiar ingredients into a bloody tasty stew. They’ve earned the right to set their next movie in the Bahamas.

