

## “WAR OF THE DEAD” (Toronto After Dark Review)

Written by Kelly Stewart

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One of the world premieres at this year’s Toronto After Dark Film Festival was the new zombie-action flick WAR OF THE DEAD, which played as a double feature with the buddy comedy DEADHEADS during “Zombie Appreciation Day” at the tail end of the city’s infamous Zombie Walk (with these filmmakers as the guests of honor). WAR has had quite the tortured history—over eight years in the making with major changes in the cast, the production team and even the title (it started filming as STONE’S WAR, starring James Van Der Beek!). The production has so many stops and starts that it’s likely no one thought it would ever see the light of day. So it’s quite a surprise that WAR OF THE DEAD has turned out to be an extremely impressive debut by Finland’s Marko Mäkilaakso.

WAR OF THE DEAD takes place during WWII in 1941 on the Soviet/Finland border. It begins with a very brief prologue showing how, two years earlier, the Nazis had been doing experiments on captured Russian soldiers, attempting to kill and then reanimate them. The project was abandoned, but the living-dead soldiers remain in the area. We then jump ahead to ’41 and meet up with a team of Special Forces commandos, a mix of American and Finnish soldiers about to infiltrate a Soviet camp in the Lithuanian region, who find themselves completely outnumbered by the zombies remaining at the abandoned camp and research facilities.



These ghouls aren’t the slow, shambling variety; they’re still hardcore soldiers, back from the dead and trying to take bites out of victims rather than using guns. The Allied squad is quickly reduced in the zombies’ first attack to just a small group, including American Martin Stone

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(Andrew Tiernan) and Finnish soldiers Laasko (Mikko Leppilampi) and Captain Niemi (Jouko Ahola). The remaining troops capture Russian soldier Kolya (Samuel Vauramo), who quickly switches sides to help them through the terrain and make it through the night.

The structural simplicity of this film is wonderful, with the entire movie taking place over one battle during one night. We are not so much introduced to the characters as they are thrust upon us. They don't really know why they're there, but they've got their marching orders and we're along for the ride. The downside to this approach is that it does lead to some confusion at first regarding who is who; it's not clear for a little while whether this is an American platoon or a Finnish one speaking English for our benefit. That problem is short-lived, though, and the film settles into an action scenario that is never dull.

Another cool facet of the film's approach is that it takes the subject matter completely seriously. There is always a temptation to get campy in movies like this, and the comparison to a film like DEAD SNOW, with its use of Nazi zombies, might be tempting—but WAR OF THE DEAD is nothing like that. It mixes slices of THE GUNS OF NAVARONE and THE DIRTY DOZEN with DAY OF THE DEAD, adopting the approach that this actually happened and the filmmakers are simply recreating a historical event. Cinematographer Hannu-Pekka Vitikainen does a brilliant job of lighting not just the sets, but the ghouls as well. Instead of just throwing all the zombie grue on screen, most of them are kept in the shadows, which keeps the action both more exciting and more mysterious.

Despite being the most expensive film ever shot in Lithuania, WAR OF THE DEAD was made for about 1.3 million Euros (\$1.8 million), which is chump change given the amount of production value on screen. The film has no big stars and is mainly confined to a few large sets, but still manages to have an epic atmosphere. You can't help coming out of the theatre feeling you have only seen a small portion of much larger potential movie. There's no word on a U.S. theatrical release yet, but WAR OF THE DEAD is worth seeking out when it arrives on these shores.

