

“JOHN DIES AT THE END” (TIFF Movie Review)

Written by Trevor Parker

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Dave Wong (Chase Williamson) meets reporter Arnie Blandstone (Paul Giamatti) late one night in an empty Chinese restaurant. Dave has a story to tell, about the intravenous ichor nicknamed “soy sauce,” and how this strange new drug can allow users to see through time and communicate with the dead.

Before Arnie’s night is over, he’ll hear the details of how Dave and friend John (Rob Mayes) used the sauce to combat carnivorous slugs, an interdimensional invasion and a monster built entirely out of frozen dinner meats. And as the coils of Dave’s weird tale spool around Arnie and gradually pull tighter, it becomes apparent that Arnie really isn’t going to like how this story ends...



As can probably be gleaned from the above summary, JOHN DIES AT THE END, director Don Coscarelli’s long-gestating follow-up to his acclaimed BUBBA HO-TEP (the final cut was a world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, with Magnet Releasing handling U.S. release late this year/early 2013), is best categorized as a comedy/horror rather than horror/comedy. Coscarelli doesn’t play things quite as square here as he did with BUBBA; scary is very much a secondary intention. And that’s OK; JOHN DIES (based on the novel by David Wong) is at its best when our pair of likable heroes are spouting their abundant wisecracks while navigating some ridiculous sci-fi situation or sight gag.

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The two debutant leads are talented finds, and hold their own against heavy screen presences like Giamatti and the great, gruff Clancy Brown, with Mayes in particular demonstrating a deft sense of timing and some hilarious line deliveries. Oscar nominee Giamatti, who also served as a producer on the film, classes up the joint as the rumped, doubting Arnie—while quietly adding to what has become an admirable horror résumé (he has now been directed by Coscarelli, David Cronenberg and Rob Zombie)—and it’s a treat to see veteran actor Glynn Turman (from GREMLINS and SUPER 8) pop up in a substantial role. A fine job of casting by Coscarelli, and the balance between the energetic newbies and screen vets works out splendidly.

As is appropriate for a film about mind-ballooning drug use, the occasionally disorienting visuals and elaborate out-of-sequence plot will require some determination on the audience’s part to keep pace—a level of focus to which a younger comedy audience might not be willing to commit. In fact, some of the humor sprouts from just how knotted up the film’s storyline becomes. Solid practical work by ex-KNB honcho Robert Kurtzman in envisioning the bizarre succession of creatures adds rubbery retro fun, while the choppy digital FX and the amateurish greenscreen backgrounds during the climax most certainly do not. Coscarelli was obviously sweating to massage a pipsqueak budget to meet the demands of JOHN DIES’ grand scope (as sketched out in Wong’s novel), with its multidimensional escapades and massive Lovecraftian tentacle monsters, and it’s too bad that the CGI falters under the load.

JOHN DIES is not the instantly heartwarming crowd-pleaser that BUBBA HO-TEP was, nor the hallucinatory waking nightmare that the PHANTASM films were during their finest moments. It is instead a very funny, very trippy experience with an atypical DONNIE DARKO-as-a-sitcom angle, and JOHN DIES will earn its cult. It likely won’t reach the mass-appeal heights of Coscarelli’s other work due to the convoluted story, but any detractors should at least respect that one of horror’s old guard is continuing to evolve his style, challenging his audience and refusing to repeat himself.

