

“WARM BODIES” (Movie Review)

Written by Michael Gingold
Friday, 01 February 2013 10:55



To address the most obvious question first: Yes, *WARM BODIES* is better than the *TWILIGHT* movies. For one thing, its undead hero has been conceived as a zombie first and a romantic hero second, not the other way around, though it does go on to spin the mythology in ways that benefit the latter.

The film’s central walking corpse is a teenager (Nicholas Hoult) who has no memory of his full name and thinks of himself as “R.” He’s one of the many, many zombies who have overrun the world, forcing the remaining humans to wall themselves into the remains of a major American city—but he’s not like the rest of the ghouls who moan and shamble along the outlying streets. He’s sentient enough to be aware of his own condition, enjoy companionship with a fellow walking stiff (Rob Corddry) and let us in on his feelings via voiceover narration. It turns out that while he does eat the brains of the living, he at least feels a little bit bad about it.



One of the brains he winds up eating is that of Perry (Dave Franco), part of a group of the living who carry out skirmishes into infected territory to grab supplies. Another member of the squad is Julie (Teresa Palmer), a young woman who shows more gumption in her first several minutes on screen in *WARM BODIES* than Kristen Stewart’s Bella demonstrated in all of the first four *TWILIGHT*s. She is understandably horrified when she witnesses Perry’s fate, but when R looks into her frightened eyes, he falls head over heels in love, spurred on by Perry’s

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memories of Julie that he has picked up by ingesting Perry’s grey matter.

What follows is an unusual courtship in which R takes Julie back to his lair in an abandoned airliner (the images of this plane and the deserted, undead-ridden airport around it, shot outside Montreal, are the movie’s most evocative), where he attempts to communicate his affection despite having an extremely limited vocabulary. Julie’s gradual warming to R, paralleled by the warming of his own formerly stopped heart, is a far more unlikely scenario than a girl swooning for a handsome, friendly vampire, but WARM BODIES succeeds where the TWILIGHTs failed thanks to the real chemistry between Hoult and Palmer. They make this supernatural scenario play as a plausible variation on the time-honored story of couples whose burgeoning passion is threatened by circumstance and family—in this case, Julie’s dad, an Army general (John Malkovich) who thinks the only good zombie is a truly dead one. (The fact that R and Julie have a balcony scene, not to mention their names, affirms where WARM BODIES’ spiritual origins lie.)

The palpable bond between the protagonists helps anchor a film that isn’t quite as consistent in its overall tone. Adapting Isaac Marion’s popular book, writer/director Jonathan Levine attempts a tricky three-way marriage between romance, comedy and horror trappings that never quite meshes. WARM BODIES doesn’t entirely water down what the zombies are—there are discreet moments of biting into skulls and other body parts, plus the even more deadly threat of the “boneys” (creatures that are little more than walking and running skeletons, brought to life via not-always-convincing CGI), which co-exist rather awkwardly alongside scenes like a montage in which Julie and her best pal Nora (Analeigh Tipton) give R a makeover to the accompanying strains of Roy Orbison’s “Oh, Pretty Woman.”

The complementary or gently ironic use of pop songs of past decades, from John Waite’s “Missing You” to Bruce Springsteen’s “Hungry Heart,” throughout WARM BODIES suggests an aim beyond teenagers to appeal to older audiences as well, as does R’s preference for vinyl records, which he haltingly explains feel “more alive” than discs—though he does have a Blu-ray of Lucio Fulci’s ZOMBIE in his collection of pop-culture artifacts. Yet it’s younger viewers who will likely be most receptive to its storyline, identifying with either the boy trying to communicate his feelings to his crush or the girl striving to be with a guy those around her don’t approve of. Zombie fans, meanwhile, will appreciate that the movie at least starts off from a place of honoring the traditional lore and might be amused by some of the variations on the theme, while wishing that they were explored in edgier directions.



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