

It's a human eat human world

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National Post

Monday, September 11, 2006

For every Tom, Dustin and Heath at the film festival, there's a homegrown talent looking for some limelight. Throughout the fest, we're profiling a cadre of cinematic Canadians. Today we look at Andrew Currie, director of zombie short Night of the Living and the new movie Fido.

Andrew Currie has had zombies on the brain for more than 10 years. Back in 1996 at the Canadian Film Centre, the Vancouver-based director wrote and filmed a 19-minute short, Night of the Living, in which a young boy imagines his alcoholic father as an undead drunk.

"From that point on I've had a fascination with zombies, in the sense of how close to people they are," says Currie, whose zombie comedy Fido premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival on Thursday. "They're so close to being human -- but not."

Even before first putting zombies on celluloid, Currie had worked on a script with writer Dennis Heaton about a boy and his pet zombie. It became the nexus of Fido, a wickedly funny satire set in


a 1950s town full of crinoline-wearing housewives, Buick-driving husbands and domesticated zombie servants. Seems a zombie outbreak some years earlier was thwarted, and the survivors learned how to control the beasties and use them for menial labour.

Currie says he saw the story as "a sweeping Douglas Sirk melodrama," set in what people perceive to be a simpler, more naive time. To afford to recreate the period believably, a major partner was sought and found: Lions Gate Films, which will distribute Fido in the United States.

"We spent many years on the script, refining it and making sure that the story worked well but also that the characters had the depth and the social satire was there," says Currie.

Among its jabs: "The elderly really aren't trusted in this world, because if they die they could become zombies and kill you," says Currie. "So they're not paid the greatest respect. But I think in our world they're not either."

Then there's ZomCon, a quasi-governmental organization responsible for

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keeping bad zombies at bay and domesticated ones under control while destroying any that run amok. "The idea of ZomCon is representative of regimes that use fear as a way of controlling the populace," says Currie. America, for instance.

In Fido, the Robinson family (Carrie-Anne Moss and Dylan Baker, with K'Sun Ray playing their young son, Timmy) purchase their first zombie to keep up with the Joneses. Mr. Robinson, suffering from post-zombie-war trauma, is afraid of it. But the missus and Timmy develop feelings. Timmy treats it as a pet, naming it Fido. And if zombies could talk, Fido might well say, "Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me."

Zombies can only moan and groan, however, which would seem to make the voluble Scottish comedian Billy Connolly an odd choice for the part. Currie saw Connolly in his BAFTA-nominated role in 1997's Mrs. Brown and found "such presence and such empathy, I thought he'd be perfect for Fido on that alone. Then I started watching his stand-

up comedy and realizing how screamingly funny he is, and I thought, if you can contain that all in one zombie, he would do wonderful things. And he really did."

Ironically, Connolly's character brings the movie to life, giving Timmy his first and only real friend and stirring up the Robinsons, who were previously only concerned with putting enough money away for a decent burial when they died -- one they wouldn't come back from.

Moss is another surprising choice. "I hadn't seen Carrie-Anne do any kind of comedy, and she always played very strong women," says Currie. But their first meeting convinced him. "She got the social satire, she got the depth of it, but she also got the humour."

It's a delicate balance for a director, he maintains. "You can really create a mishmash of acting styles if you're not careful." The only way it would work is if "the comedy comes out of the situation they're in. There was no nudge nudge, wink wink."

- Fido has finished its run at the Toronto International Film Festival. It opens wide in March.

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