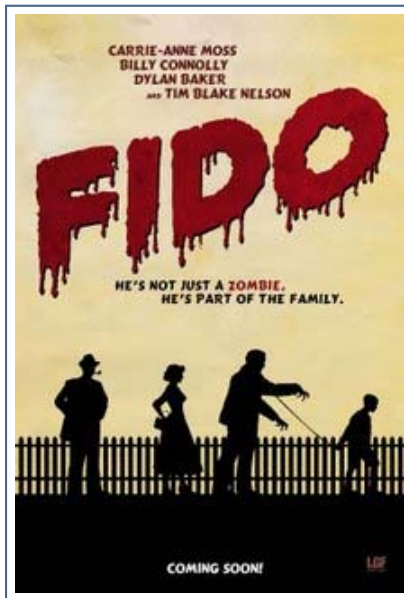


# MOVIEFORUM

2006 TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL COVERAGE AND REVIEWS

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 09, 2006

## TIFF 2006: "FIDO"



(Canada First)

Canada, 91 minutes, 2006

Cast: Billy Connelly, K'Sun Ray, Carrie-Ann Moss, Dylan Baker, Henry Czerny

Written by Andrew Currie, Robert Chomiak and Dennis Heaton

Directed by Andrew Currie

To hear the death rattle of the horror genre, one need only follow the laughter: "Abbott And Costello Meet

Frankenstein" pretty much put

the kibosh on Universal's classic era of Whale and Browning, Hammer Films camped up the dying days of the Lee/Cushing era with silly fodder like "Dracula A.D. 1972", and Andy Warhol's double-lamponing of "Dracula" and "Frankenstein" was a postmodern gallbladder f\*\*k of hoary genre conventions that would soon become buried with the bodies of Texas-based cannibals, Illinois boogeymen, and campground vivisectionists. So it's only a matter of time before the current run of "Scary Movie" parodies sends the J-horror ghosts packing their ectoplasm. But the zombie film—a comparatively recent invention modestly birthed in the Pittsburgh farmlands--has, like its subject, shown surprising resilience where vampires, werewolves, hand-stitched homunculi and Reagan-era slashers and Change-O-Head shape shifters have eventually succumbed to second-act sag. Like the famous poster put it: They Won't Stay Dead.

Last year's UK sensation, "Shaun Of The Dead" arguably invented



REVIEWS (ARCHIVED BY YEAR)

▼ 2006 (22)

▼ September (22)

TIFF 2006: "UN CRIME"

TIFF 2006: "TALES OF THE RAT FINK"

TIFF 2006: "THIS FILTHY WORLD"

TIFF 2006; "BLACK BOOK"

TIFF 2006: "THE FOUNTAIN"

TIFF 2006: "SEVERANCE"

TIFF 2006: "BUGMASTER"

TIFF 2006: "TRAPPED ASHES"

TIFF 2006: "ALATRISTE"

TIFF 2006: "BLACK SHEEP"

TIFF 2006: "THE ABANDONED"

TIFF 2006: "THE LAST WINTER"

TIFF 2006: "FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION"

TIFF 2006: "MACBETH"

the “zom-com” (figure it out)—a distinction only the staunchest “I Was A Teenage Zombie” fan would argue belongs to another film. An odd(er) one amongst a steady cycle of big ticket “living dead” reinventions and revivals--the “Resident Evil” series, Danny Boyle’s “28 Days Later”, and Zack Snyder’s “Dawn Of The Dead” remake among them—SOTD deftly juggled cheery character comedy along with a surprisingly graphic and uncompromisingly bleak cross-Atlantic transplant of Romero’s unexplained resurrection pandemic. The humour arguably enhanced the horror of the situation—one could almost hear the old priest warning: “if we stop hitting the pub, we lose the war”.

In Andrew Currie’s delightfully bent “Fido”, the war has been won. The scratchy, black and white educational film that sets the scene informs us that sometime in the early 1950s, our world passed through a cloud of space dust that caused the dead to rise with an appetite for living human flesh. Thanks to the efforts of the ZomCon Corporation, a special device—essentially an electronic dog collar--was invented to curb the ghouls’ cravings, rendering them docile and far closer to their voodoo-spawned namesakes. Taking a cue from George Romero’s “Day Of The Dead”, in which Richard Liberty’s “Doctor Frankenstein” proposed that the flesh-eater could be domesticated if its appetite were controlled through Pavlovian conditioning (and a rather twisted “reward” system). “Fido” picks up a few years into this alternate Eisenhower-era in which keeping up with the Jones means keeping a rotting corpse chained up in the yard.

In the picturesque company town of Willard, conformity is bliss and decorum the law of the land. Just about every nuclear family has a house and a car and a dad with good-paying job at ZomCon, who protect the residents with a secure fence to keep out the predatory ghouls who roam “the Wastelands”. A great deal of them own a zombie servant as well—although some, like neighbour Dr. Theopolus (Nelson) prefer a more curvaceous model that suggests a need for something more than the rote tasks of lawn mowing and grocery delivery. Every conceivable threat has been accounted for: TV ads sell devices to detect imminent heart failure in senior citizens (they can immediately pop up to take a bite out of you!), and funerals are conducted with the head and the body buried separately.

TIFF 2006: "PAN'S LABYRINTH"  
TIFF 2006: "BORAT..."  
TIFF 2006: "RESCUE DAWN"  
TIFF 2006: "FIDO"  
TIFF 2006: "PARIS JE T'AIME"  
TIFF 2006: "THE HOST"  
(Gwoemul)  
TIFF 2006: "END OF THE LINE"  
Movieforum Turns Seven At  
TIFF 2006

► 2005 (25)

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#### ABOUT ME



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Timmy Robinson (Ray) is a precocious and inquisitive boy whose resistance to classroom conformity leaves him a lonely young lad indeed. His parents are kind and indulging enough but his mom Helen (Moss) is more concerned over the family's perceived lack of status, embarrassed that they don't own a zombie; thanks to her husband Bill's (Baker) crippling fear of them.

Helen gets one anyway (a near-unrecognizable Connelly), and Timmy takes an immediate liking to him...it? For one thing, the ghoul at least attempts to play catch, which is more than he can say for his burnout father. It also saves its young master from two schoolyard bullies and when its collar malfunctions, rids the neighborhood of its particularly meddlesome old biddy. Timmy christens it "Fido", who soon starts to show up Bill as the true "man of the house", living or otherwise. Helen remains an understanding wife and mother but is progressive for her time, bravely scolding her husband to fetch his own beers, and burning the remains of a zombie massacre to preserve peace in the community (and to prevent Fido from being "recalled").

Despite her best maternal intentions, an outbreak of fresh flesh-eating results from Fido's unfortunate "accident", and ZomCon's head honcho/war hero Jonathon Bottoms (Czerny) starts sniffing around the Robinson household with suspicion. He's a propaganda-spouting paranoiac who keeps his zombie trophies mounted in his study and would off his wife in an instant if she "turned", and this alpha-male braggadocio further threatens spineless Bill's fragile manhood, which is already bruised by his son's preference for the company of his silent, but infinitely more accessible, "pet".

Originally conceived in 1994, "Fido" was shot in 37 days in scenic Kelowna, British Columbia on a modest budget, every dollar of which is evident onscreen. Jan (Beowulf And Grendel) Kessler's lens harkens to the same Sirkian palette sampled in "Blue Velvet", "Edward Scissorhands", "Pleasantville" and "Far From Heaven", with its candied hues contrasting evocatively with the ashen faces and petrified landscapes that speak of the menace that's hushed away like an improper social disease.

In addition to period-perfect architecture, autos, and attire, there was obviously some money left to craft many clever period details: the educational films, the ZomCom hood ornaments, Bottom's war

memorabilia and clippings, and best of all, the “Zombie War” bed sheets in Timmy’s room (now there’s something for an eBay auction).

Of course, this is hardly the first genre attempt to lampoon suburbia’s dead-eyed embracing of homogenous thought, consumerism, and family dysfunction: Bob Balaban’s little-scene “Parents” and Joe Dante’s mainstream flop “The Burbs” both uncovered cannibalism beneath conformity (and each is vastly underrated and worth another look), and Peter Jackson’s “Dead Alive”/“Brain Dead” unleashed the living dead on a sleepy New Zealand town in the 1950s, courting Oedipal issues before abandoning any headier concerns for a burlesque of unbridled bloodletting.

“Fido” is certainly gruesome—it’ll be a real trick to sell this one as a heartwarming, offbeat comedy (it won’t open until March 2007) when there’s enough graphic flesh eating to send an unenlightened genre newcomer reaching for the barf bag—but its unique voice is evident in the chemistry between its rich ensemble (none of whom ever ham it up) and their twisted, even kinky, relationships. Helen and Fido’s nicely underplayed “All That Heaven Allows” longing and Theopolis’ undead Vargas girl (sporting a facial by Berni Wrightson) make the study of pan-corporeal relationships worthy of a feature of its own (their zombies “do not get boners”, according to Currie and collaborators during the Q&A, but I betcha Brian Yuzna’s do...).

Ultimately, it’s the story of a boy and his dog, and while young K’Sun Ray is another charming pre-tween discovery, it’s “Fido”’s movie and Billy Connelly has to carry the whole damn show. And that he does—those familiar with the wild haired Scottish comedian’s manic and definitely R-rated stage act (and perhaps notsomuch with his fine dramatic work in “Mrs. Brown”) won’t recognize him in drab coveralls with trimmed, matted hair, and grey pallor giving a largely silent performance that could’ve stopped at Howard Sherman’s “Bub” but instead achieves the nuances of Karloff’s tragicomic pantomime in James Whale’s original “Frankenstein”.

Now, as for the sequel--I read this past weekend that the Liberal Party of Canada has been signing up dead people...any chance of

Fido running for office?

-Robert J. Lewis

AT 12:53 PM

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