

FEARSmag Takes a Guided Tour of THE LAND OF THE DEAD With Director George A. Romero.

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It has been two decades since George A. Romero's zombies have walked the screens. Once again the dead are rising to consume the living in LAND OF THE DEAD.

The world as we know it is a fleeting memory. What's left of civilization has walled up in fortified cities while the dead roam freely in the wasteland. The wealthy and powerful try to maintain the illusion of life as it was. Some live in exclusive towers, like Fiddler's Green, one of the last bastions of the ruling class. On the streets below the remaining less fortunate inhabitants eke out a hard life, seeking what little comfort they can in vices like gambling, prostitution, drugs or anything that offers even a fleeting respite from the hell their lives have become.

Kaufman (DENNIS HOPPER) lords over the Fiddler's Green. To bring in much needed supplies for the occupants of the city he's hired a hardened group of mercenaries. Headed by Riley (SIMON BAKER), and his second-in-command, Cholo (JOHN LEGUIZAMO), they run retrieval missions outside the city, protected by their massive armored vehicle, Dead Reckoning.

Unrest and anarchy are on the rise among the city's disenfranchised and, outside, the army of the dead is changing, evolving, learning to organize and communicate. When Kaufman shoots down Cholo in his hopes to buy a place among the elite of Fiddler's Green he commandeers Dead Reckoning to extort enough money out of Kaufman so he find a new start. However, Riley is sent out to stop Cholo and retrieve Dead Reckoning for Kaufman. However, an army of evolving zombies is storming the city. Will Riley be able to stop Cholo and save the inhabitants of his city?

His first feature, Night of the Living Dead (1968), re-defined the genre, not only with its explicit violence, but also with a satirical view of American society that reflected the turmoil of the times. That film helped to earn writer and director George A. Romero the title of "father of the modern horror film." In 1978 he made Martin, a deeply disturbing story of a lonely boy who is convinced he is a vampire and his 1979 Dawn of the Dead was set in a typical suburban shopping mall where zombies beset a band of struggling survivors. Romero continued to do interesting work throughout the '80s and '90s. His films during this period included Knightriders (1981), Creepshow (1982), and Day of the Dead (1985), a progressive, eerily claustrophobic film, which was the supposed finale to Romero's zombie trilogy. 1988 brought the production of Monkey Shines, Romero's first studio developed film. In 1990 he collaborated with Italian filmmaker Dario Argento on Two Evil Eyes, which was inspired by two Edgar Allan Poe short stories. Stephen King and Romero teamed up again in 1993 on The Dark Half, and in 2000 Romero made Bruiser, a taut, frightening and highly original tale of revenge. Romero's LAND OF THE DEAD features Dennis Hopper, Asia Argento, Robert Joy and John Leguizamo, is hopefully the first in a new series of zombie films.

FEARS: It's been several years between Day of the Dead and LAND OF THE DEAD. In that time frame, when did you come up with the idea for this fourth installment for the "Dead" series?

George A. Romero: I always wanted to do one, especially way back in the 90s. I had this conceit where I made a Dead film in the 60s, 70s and 80s, and I wanted to do one in the 90s. I just missed it. Itâ we got into development on a lot of projects and nothing happened, and it was just one thing after another.

I made a little film called Bruiser in 2000, and after that I started to seriously think about writing a story for another Dead film. I wrote a screenplay, but it was more about, AIDS, homelessness, and things like that. It was about ignoring the problems, and it wasnât about 9/11 or post 9/11. When we finished the script and sent it around it was literally just days before 9/11 happened. After that nobody wanted to make a hard-assed movie. I pulled it back. After the invasion of Iraq, and all of that, I took it off the shelf and pointed it a bit more towards this new normal. Itâs been in my head while but it took several major turns.

FEARS: When you look back over your body of work, from Night of the Living Dead to LAND OF THE DEAD, no matter how fantastical or bleak a story you chose to tell there is always this element of hope. What does hope mean for you and how significant is it to you that your films offer some measure of hope?

George A. Romero: Iâm not really sure, but I think it might have to do with the fact that Iâm a child of the 60s. This hope. We actually thought that we were going to bring some change, or influence the world. It was all this peace and love. It didnât work out. I know for me, I do try to include it in my films, or at least have characters that are operating with hope. However, I usually end up with the situation disintegrating, or at least not getting any better. The biggest thing that Iâve notice over the course of my life is that is what happens. You start thinking things like, "Wow, we got this great President, Jimmy Crater," but then look what happens. I guess it is there underlying thematically in my films.

FEARS: One of the characters we meet at the opening of LAND OF THE DEAD is Big Daddy. In relation to your Dead universe, is Big Daddy the son, grandson, or great-grandson of Bub the zombie in Day of the Dead?

George A. Romero: Yeah, Iâm sure he is, but I donât think it has gone that far. It actually started in Dawn of the Dead. The protagonists that are turned into zombies at least showed some signs of memory. When Fly Boy gets it, he leads the zombies up to where they were living. At the very end of that film there is a zombie who has been dragging a gun around for the entire film, but probably not even realizing that itâs a gun. At the end he picks up the heroâs gun and decides itâs a much better gun than the one he was carrying, but still not knowing itâs a gun. Bub, of course, has the scientist that is trying to domesticate him. He is like a teddy bear, but itâs all imitative behavior. The scientist says, "Push the button on the tape recorder here." Bub does it and hears music, and he responds to it. At the end of the film, Bub shows rage and sorrow when the scientist is killed. He ends up shooting the villain. So basically, Big Daddy is just one step away from that. What is different is that this time it is other zombies that are imitating Big Daddyâs imitative behavior. That becomes a bit more threatening, especially when you have a gang of zombies that are putting two-&-two together.

FEARS: The film industry has made amazing technical advance since Night of the Living Dead, and even Day of the Dead. As a director, what do you see as the difference in the roles of digital and physical effects in a film?

George A. Romero: I donât know, I still like Ray Harryhausenâs stuff. There is a certain charm to it, and I would have to shot all of LAND OF THE DEAD with practical and mechanical effects. However, there were a few things that we just couldnât pull off, and that wasnât due to lack of trying. The only effect that is really computer enhanced is the priest whose head is dangling on his back and then flips it over. Greg Nicotero tried to pull it off with puppets but it just didnât look right. We ended up going to the computers for that. Most of the CGI we used in the film was to create the buildings, do gun-flashes, backgrounds, and moving cars. It was all the garbaggio stuff thatâs not really effects work.

FEARS: I think when you're dealing with a contemporary audience that is aware of computer games like Resident Evil and the like, CGI in a film is that special for them and you just don't get the same performance out of a CGI zombie that you can from an actor wearing makeup.

George A. Romero: In the script I didn't have such extraordinary creatures that I needed CGI to pull them off. You can get away with murder that way. Still, the priest was the one where we had to commission a CGI house to do it. I'm not sure it works as well that we either. Some times CGI just lifts me right out of the movie. You see something that's impossible and you think, "That's CGI!" It's a bit less impressive. I have a thirteen year-old son who'll say, "It's like I, Robot." I'm not impressed.

FEARS: The script is vintage Romero. Of course there are touches in the story from the other "Dead" films, but there are also aspects of the story that remind me of your films like Knightriders, The Crazies, and even Martin.

George A. Romero: Wow, even Martin! (Laughs)

FEARS: Is this your quintessential Romero zombie film?

George A. Romero: I don't know, but I hope it isn't the last one. It's so hard, because we literally finished the weeks ago. Now, I'm still in the cutting room working on the DVD director's cut. All I see are the details of it, scene scene. I won't be able to really watch it for a while.

I think we pulled it off. I feel very good about LAND OF THE DEAD. Still I'm not going to be able to watch it and decide where I rank it among the four films until I can finally sit down and really watch it some months from now ± really watch it as a flick. When I'm working on a film, or just finished a film, I just can't see it. All I'm thinking about is what what we could have done differently. Your looking at it for the details and you just can't see the whole.

FEARS: As LAND OF THE DEAD hits theaters, you're still entrenched in several projects ± The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon, The Ill, Diamond Dead, and you're slated to do an episode of Masters of Horror for producer Mick Garris.

George A. Romero: I'm hoping to do Masters of Horror. That's the plan, but you never know. If this movie opens strong, all of a sudden everything might get trumped. "If they want a sequel quickly, that trumps everything." I'll wait and see when the movie opens.

FEARS: As a "Master of Horror," you've created classic horror movies and inspired at least two generations of filmmakers. Is it any harder today to tell a good horror story, or do you have to alter your approach to the material slightly for a contemporary audience?

George A. Romero: I think, unfortunately, what the audience expects is different. They expect to be thrilled, and they either expect a hundred-million-dollar effects flick or they're willing to accept something like The Ring, or Saw. My mind just doesn't run that way. I don't think either of those films, or The Grudge or any of those films, has really advanced genre, or are a landmark in any regards. That's always been the case, as with the Friday the 13th flicks. People who go to a horror show are looking for a laugh in the dark or something ± make me jump and I'll come out somewhat satisfied. That's really been, as far as I'm concerned, sad. Nobody is using it as allegory or parable. These films are just look

scare the shit out of you with some ridiculous premise -- not that the dead walking isnâ€™t ridiculous -- or itâ€™s an extravaganza.

FEARS: So having said that, at the end of LAND OF THE DEAD what do you hope the audience comes away with?

George A. Romero: I donâ€™t hope to be an influence that way. I just hope they dig it, man. I hope that itâ€™s idiomatic enough. My stuff has had this incredible shelf life, which Iâ€™m tremendously grateful for, so even the younger audiences have seen my other three movies. Hopefully there is some willingness on their part to go see the fourth one. I hope so! I donâ€™t think that this film is going to influence the genre, influence the business, or how studios view these films. I hope it pays off and you get a few jumps. I hope itâ€™s irreverent, and, for audiences who want to think about it on that level, political enough. For me, itâ€™s always about trying to walk that line. I try to make sure it has that underbelly, but, at the same time, I try to make sure that itâ€™s an okay ride. Thatâ€™s really all Iâ€™ve ever been doing, man.

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