

EVENTS REVIEWS

Horrorthon 2007

The tenth annual Horrorthon, held at the Irish Film Institute from 25th to 29th October was the strongest yet, with a diverse and intelligently chosen line-up programmed by Ed King, Michael Griffin and Conor McMahon. Certainly, attendance seemed to be up on last year, with many of the more popular features selling out hours in advance, and even the traditionally less busy screenings (such as those held last thing at night and first thing in the afternoon) generally being very well attended. In all, twenty-seven films were screened over the five days of the festival, which began on the Thursday evening with a showing of the new vampire movie *Thirty Days of Night* (an adaptation of the graphic novel of the same name) and the only Irish cinema screening of *Saw* director James Wan's latest effort, evil ventriloquist's dummy movie *Dead Silence*. Briefly, and in no particular order, here are some of the festival's highlights.

Motel Hell (Kevin O'Connor, 1980)

This gory, gloriously camp 80s classic was a real guilty pleasure. Starring Rory Calhoun (standing on his hind legs) as the jovial "Farmer Vincent" whose extra-special fritters contain "all kinds of critters", it's a kind of jolly, silly yet at times gruesomely disturbing reworking of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, and was only the first film of the festival in which barbeques would feature prominently. It also provided proof, if proof be needed, that for some reason the sight of a man with a pigs head over his own is very unnerving.

Gamerz (Robbie Fraser, 2005)

Though not a horror film, the Glasgow-set *Gamerz* was nevertheless an amiable, affectionate homage to the insular, competitive world of the RPG (roleplaying game) and those who play them in which a likeable young cast did their best to overcome an obviously limited budget and just about succeeded. It also taught us that the Scottish for 'skanger' is 'ned', which is bound to come in useful one of these days

Botched (Kit Ryan, 2007)

Although it starts off like a low-budget rip-off of early Guy Ritchie, home-grown movie *Botched* actually turned out to be something quite different: an energetic, genuinely funny, and gleefully bizarre splatter movie along the lines of *Severance* which deserves to do well both at the box-office and on DVD release. B-Movie stalwart Stephen Dorff stars as a thief ordered to undertake one more heist by his mob-boss employer Sean Pertwee who finds more than he bargains for in an exclusive Moscow apartment block which contains the deranged descendants of Ivan the Terrible. Yes, it's all very silly and over the top, and the largely Irish cast (which includes Bronagh Gallagher and Hugh O'Connor) inevitably sport terrible Russian accents, but the film is nevertheless mostly entertaining and quite funny, and knows not to take itself too seriously. The effects are pretty good too, although the film does (perhaps intentionally) feature the fakest-looking rat I've ever seen on the big screen.

Joshua (George Ratliff, 2007)

One of the best horror films of the weekend, and indeed, of the year, *Joshua* is probably the finest 'evil child' film since *The Omen* (the original, not the flaccid remake). It's a riveting, intelligent, and at times, morbidly funny psychological thriller in which the arrival of a new baby tears an affluent New York

family apart. The horror here lies in the subtle hints that Ratliff doles out to the audience as to the true nature of his disturbed young protagonist: is precocious ten-year old Joshua merely a troubled young boy struggling to adjust to the new arrival, or is he something entirely more sinister? The performances by Vera Farminga and, especially, Sam Rockwell, as Joshua's increasingly unhinged parents are excellent, as is that of young Jacob Kogan, whose eerie composure and perfect posture only reinforced my long-held suspicion that unusually well-mannered, well-dressed children are evil. This was also the only time I've heard an audience cheer because the small child onscreen has been brutally punched in the face.

End of the Line (Maurice Devereaux, 2006)

Low-budget Canadian movie *End of the Line* begins with a fantastic premise – the followers of a deranged cult leader simultaneously begin to exterminate non-believers once the signal to begin Judgement day is sent – and for much of its running time is a fairly taut, exciting film. It does however fall apart completely in the last ten minutes or so, and one can't help but feel that something went very wrong in the editing room: a crucial subplot (which deals with the reason why the cult members are so susceptible to the demands of their leader) appears to have been removed entirely, and the conclusion is very muddled indeed.

Predator (John McTiernan, 1987)

“If it bleeds, we can kill it!” What more can one say about the deliriously over-the-top 1987 action/horror flick except to note that, unbelievably, two of the cast (Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger) would later become US Governors and director John McTiernan has recently been sentenced to jail for perjury?

Dracula (Terence Fisher, 1958)

It was wonderful to see a full house for the Sunday afternoon showing of this beautifully restored print of the 1958 classic. Preceded by an interesting introduction from Hammer scholar Robert Simpson, this was a real delight to watch, and it wasn't difficult to see why Christopher Lee's (largely non-speaking) performance as the imposing, blood-shot-eyed count made him a star. Tightly plotted it ain't, and trying to figure out which country (or countries) the film is actually set in is a challenge in itself, but that is all part of its old-school charm. The climatic face-off between Dracula and Van Helsing (Peter Cushing) and the Count's subsequent disintegration are worth the price of admission alone.

Shrooms (Paddy Breathnach, 2007)

Whilst it was great to have an Irish film as this year's surprise screening, it was clear within the first ten minutes that the derivative, dull *Shrooms* was going to disappoint. It suffered first of all from the fact that it was actually the *second* film of the weekend in which a van load of bland American teenagers travelled into the woods, took drugs, had bad trips and were picked off by a mysterious killer: David Arquette's cheesy but enjoyable *Trippers* (shown on Saturday) had almost exactly the same basic premise, albeit without the Irish setting and with rather more energy. There were some initially interesting elements here, such as the (woefully unfulfilled) suggestion that some particularly pertinent local horrors (abusive clergy, brutal reform schools) would come into play, occasional flashes of stoner wit (as in the talking cow scene), and some serviceable special effects, but this will definitely not be the break-out hit that Irish horror cinema so sorely needs, and the 'shocking' final twist has already been better employed elsewhere – most notably in the nasty French horror hit *Haute Tension* a few years back. Unfortunately, this was one of the biggest disappointments of the weekend and indeed I have yet to encounter anyone who actually

liked *Shrooms*, which in itself bodes ill for its box-office prospects. Those interested in horror films in which fungi play a prominent part would be much better off watching the 1963 Japanese classic *Matango: Attack of the Mushroom People* instead...

Teeth (Mitchell Lichtenstein, 2007)

Horror/Indie flick *Teeth* aroused more gasps of horror and groans of dismay from the (male) members of the audience than any other film at Horrorthon 2007. It's a funny, likable, and audacious black comedy about a clean-living young high-school student named Dawn who has been born with a bizarre mutation: a razor toothed vagina. The premise may be notably over the top, but this is actually a remarkably intelligent, likeable film buoyed by a highly sympathetic performance from leading actress Jess Weixler. There are some unforgettable scenes here, such as the most memorable cinematic trip to the gynaecologist since David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*. Along with *Joshua*, this was probably the best film of the entire festival.

Stuck (Stuart Gordon, 2007)

This was actually the second effort by *Reanimator* director and long-time Horrorthon favourite Gordon in this year's festival: the first was "The Black Cat" a Masters of Horror episode which featured a barnstorming turn from his regular collaborator Jeffrey Coombs as a deranged Edgar Allan Poe. Loosely based upon a real-life incident, *Stuck* stars Stephen Rea as a sad-sack loser whose already bleak existence becomes even more excruciating when he's mown down by a monstrously self-obsessed young woman (Mena Suvari) who leaves him trapped in her windshield rather than risk getting arrested for drunk driving. It's rather more naturalistic than some might have expected from Gordon – Rea's trip to the job centre at the beginning of the film is notably bleak, and we get some sense early on of the pressures that help Suvari's character make the choices that she does – but there's still plenty of gore on display, and Rea's unbearably painful predicament will arouse wincing of sympathy in even the most hardened viewer. Whilst it may well have been more effective with a leaner running time – perhaps as another episode of Masters of Horror – this is still a taut, compelling film anchored by two excellent leading performances, and along with his forthcoming film, the David Mamet-scripted *Edmond*, it suggests that Gordon remains someone to watch with interest.

Planet Terror (Robert Rodriguez, 2007)

The concluding film of the festival, *Planet Terror* was everything that Tarantino's wordy, pretentious *Death Proof* tried to be, but wasn't – an exhilarating, hilarious, and inventive thrill ride which actually managed to approximate the tone and 'everything goes' attitude of the exploitation movies it so affectionately pays homage to. Appropriately, it was preceded by the first Irish screening of Horrorthon programmer Ed King's horror/comedy short *The Blaxorcist*, in which the spirit of Godfather of Soul James Brown has to be exorcised from a young white girl by the "Blaxorcist" of the title... "Get up ah! Get on up!" See Jenny McDonnell's leading article in the Film Review section for more on *Planet Terror*.

Bernice M. Murphy

David Lynch in Dublin, 20th October 2007

Throughout his career, David Lynch has been notoriously reticent about discussing the meaning of his films: any enquiry as to what a film might be about is more likely than not to meet with a deadpan “It’s about 120 minutes”. In recent years, although he has remained tight-lipped about specific interpretations of his work, he has become more forthcoming about the methods through which he approaches filmmaking. 2006 saw the publication of *Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity*, Lynch’s paean to the role played by Transcendental Meditation in his creative process, and he has recently embarked on a mission to promote Transcendental Meditation through his charity, the David Lynch Foundation for Consciousness-Based Education and World Peace, and by touring with 1960s *troubadour* Donovan. In October of this year, the unlikely pairing made an appearance in Dublin, in an event co-hosted by the School of Drama, Film and Music, Trinity College Dublin, and the David Lynch Foundation. The performance took two parts, a Q&A with Lynch followed by a live set of Donovan’s greatest hits (including Lynch’s favourite, “Season of the Witch”). Demand for tickets proved so great that the performance was broadcast live into another lecture hall, setting up the most uncanny aspect of the event when audience members in the “overflow hall” were also given the opportunity to put questions to Lynch, by broadcasting their disembodied voices into the main arena.

On paper, the pairing of Lynch and Donovan is clearly an odd one, but in truth the even stranger combination seems to be that of Lynch with Transcendental Meditation, an impression that was reflected by many of the questions audience members put to the filmmaker. In essence, it seems difficult to reconcile the dark, nightmarish vistas of most of his work with the mantra of pure bliss and enlightenment that he propounds through his meditative practices. But in Lynch’s terms (as he puts it in his book): “the filmmaker doesn’t have to be suffering to show suffering. You can show it, show the human condition, show conflicts and contrasts, but you don’t have to go through that yourself. You are the orchestrator of it, but you’re not in it.” This is what Lynch claims Transcendental Meditation allows him to do: to dive within his consciousness and capture ideas which in turn translate into his striking cinematic language. The two, then, are fundamentally connected for Lynch, and practically all of his answers during this Q&A session returned to his commitment to Transcendental Meditation and the possibility of achieving “pure bliss”, the phrase that peppered his responses, appearing almost mantra-like. He remained less forthcoming on other aspects of the filmmaking process: for example, a question as to which of his own films was his favourite met with a tight-lipped refusal to claim a favourite child (but an admission that “*Dune* is the nastiest little child”). Nonetheless, he did take the opportunity to promote his other favourite topic du jour, his newfound preference for digital video over film (employed in his most recent work, *INLAND EMPIRE*).

Lynch comes across as an impassioned and entertaining speaker, delivering his responses in a manner that will be familiar to anyone who recalls his turn as FBI Regional Bureau Chief Gordon Cole in *Twin Peaks*, and his enthusiasm for his topic is almost palpable. As an insight into the mind and creative processes

behind some of the most unsettling films of the last thirty years, this performance did prove fundamentally compelling; and although some may be put off by the seemingly unfashionable New Age dimension that this introduces to the man Mel Brooks once described as “Jimmy Stewart from Mars”, it should actually come as no real surprise, merely adding yet another layer to the enigmatic world of David Lynch.

Jenny McDonnell