

Ash vs Evil Dead, Season Two (Starz, 2016)

Following the disappointment that was the last *Evil Dead* film of 2013, a movie that fans of Ashley Williams (the character played by Bruce Campbell in the original films, released in 1981, 1987, and 1992 respectively) had waited for over twenty years to experience, the prospect of a television series based on the *Evil Dead* films may have raised a few critical eyebrows.¹ However, the success of Season One of *Ash vs Evil Dead*, which premiered on American television network Starz on 31 October 2015, served to remind horror fans that Bruce Campbell, Sam Raimi, and Robert Tapert (who were all involved in the original films) can still deliver when it comes to comedy gore, body horror, and demonology, by transposing their cult-film expertise onto the small screen.

For audiences who adored the gore-laden, chainsaw-wielding wisecracks of the first season, Season Two of *Ash vs Evil Dead*, first aired by Starz on 2 October 2016, aims to further satisfy fans at the expense of its long-suffering, entrail-encrusted characters (and actors). From the opening episode, 'Home', we are immersed in Ash's hometown of Elk Grove and meet his father Brock, played by the perfectly cast and suitably large-chinned Lee Majors. As Ash wallows in nostalgia, the audience may be surprised to learn that their hero has been cast out by the local community, labelled a multiple axe murderer, and is known as 'Ashy Slashy' for having (unwillingly) killed his possessed girlfriend and closest friends in a cabin in the woods, many years before. When evil entities arrive to inhabit the townspeople and turn them into Deadites (a person who is possessed by an ancient demonic spirit), it falls to Ash once again to save the neighbourhood and carve himself a new reputation.

One of the main problems with director Fede Alvarez's 2013 *Evil Dead* film was its absence of humour. The original franchise revelled in bad-taste jokes, terrible puns, and visual gags, all of which thankfully has been restored in *Ash vs Evil Dead*. In fact, if the Oscars gave an award in the category 'Best Comedic Use of a Cadaver', then the second episode of the second season, entitled 'The Morgue', would surely earn a lifetime-achievement honour. While the entire series is full of witty lines, visual humour, and slapstick (splatterstick?) comedy, the scene where Ash must retrieve the *Necronomicon* (a

¹ See Cory Everett, 'SXSW Review: *Evil Dead* Is a Grim, Humorless, Ultraviolent Update of a Horror Classic', *Indiewire*, 9 March 2013 <<http://www.indiewire.com/2013/03/sxsw-review-evil-dead-is-a-grim-humorless-ultraviolent-update-of-a-horror-classic-100926/>> [accessed 7 September 2017]; Doug Roos, 'Evil Dead 2013 Was OK but Disappointing', *The Sky Has Fallen*, 8 October 2013 <<http://theskyhasfallenmovie.blogspot.ie/2013/10/evil-dead-2013-was-ok-but-disappointing.html>> [accessed 8 September 2017]; and Richard Roeper, 'Evil Dead', *Roger Ebert.com*, 2 April 2013 <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/evil-dead-2013>> [accessed 7 September 2017].

cursed book, the name of which nods to the work of H. P. Lovecraft, and which summons the Deadites) from a corpse, and falls prey to an errant length of demonic bowel, is impossible to watch without laughing til you gasp for air. Forget about severed arms and exploding heads: the sight of Ash stumbling around the morgue, wearing a dead body like a Halloween accessory, is surely the one image that will stick in viewers' minds for many years to come.

A further strength of *Ash vs Evil Dead* is the fact that it consciously rewards aficionados of the original *Evil Dead* films, incorporating numerous allusions, both subtle and explicit, to the original franchise. In addition to the reprisal of its classic characters, we again encounter some of its more infamous adversaries and set pieces. For example, in an episode in Season Two, 'DUI', Ash's beloved Delta car is stolen by local teenagers, along with the salvaged *Necronomicon*. When one of the tearaway passengers reads from the book, both she and the car become possessed and embark on a killing spree. The infamous cabin in the woods and possessed tree are also revisited, as Ash attempts to travel back in time to the period before he first discovered the cursed tome, in the episode 'Home Again'. Here, fans are also treated to another manifestation of the Kandarian (ancient demonic) witch in the cabin's cellar, this time hosted by Henrietta Knowby (played by Alison Quigan, and by Ted Raimi when in demonic form), wife of Professor Knowby, the first translator of the *Necronomicon*. Whereas the 2013 film appeared to force in elements from the original films to create some kind of plot continuity, *Ash vs Evil Dead* employs these allusions to make the storylines and humour seem even more warped, while satisfying the fervour of the franchise's cult following at the same time.

Another positive element of the series is its development of new supporting characters. Pablo Simon Bolivar (Ray Santiago) and Kelly Maxwell (Dana DeLorenzo), two characters who were first introduced in Season One, are now firmly established as Ash's partners in his quest for Deadite extermination, and their continued development strengthens this season's story arc. Kelly in particular has grown into her role as strong female warrior, with a flair for delivering innovatively expletive-ridden dialogue. Pablo, the innocent moral compass to Ash's self-interested behaviour, undergoes a more physical transformation. Formerly possessed by the demonic human-skin bindings of the *Necronomicon*, in Season Two, he begins to hallucinate and gradually becomes a physical incarnation of the book itself. The character Ruby Knowby, who is hiding a more nefarious identity, also rolls up her sleeves to join the gang in a joint attempt to banish the demon Baal (Joel Tobeck). Played by Lucy Lawless of *Xena Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) fame, Ruby is the first confirmed

LGBTQ+ character in the *Evil Dead* franchise. After displaying a non-platonic interest in policewoman Amanda Fisher (Jill Marie Jones) in Season One, this season features Ruby revealing that she was once married to the male Baal, but she also takes the opportunity to kiss Polly (Shareena Clanton), a female character, who is really Baal in disguise. In an age where gender fluidity is being more widely recognised and expressions of alternative sexuality are becoming more common on film and television screens, horror and sci-fi texts have often failed to reflect this progress. *Ash vs Evil Dead*'s efforts in this respect are therefore welcome, and well overdue.

Another way in which the series has been brought up to date is in the arena of special effects. The *Evil Dead* films were always known for their outrageous splatter, and with horror series such as AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) increasing the on-screen gore, *Ash vs Evil Dead* has become even grislier. Sam Raimi and chief special-effects master Greg Nicotero (who is also responsible for the special effects in *The Walking Dead*) have revealed on fan websites the incredible volumes of fake blood they employed for the films, including dropping a full fifty-five gallon drum full of the stuff onto Bruce Campbell's head for a scene in *Evil Dead 2*.² The TV series continues in the same (bloody) vein, and ramps up the splatter factor even further with the introduction of the character Baal, generating some of the most disturbing and goriest scenes in *Ash vs Evil Dead*. Using his powers of mental manipulation, Baal tries to convince Ash that he has become insane, and poses as Professor Peacock in order to ensnare Ash inside a nightmarish asylum. This setting grants the writers a license to indulge in ever-escalating levels of bloodletting and head-smashing, at one point coating the entire cast in what is quite possibly hundreds of gallons of indescribably gruesome gore.

However, while the splatter factor is of course central to the *Evil Dead* universe, there can be no discussion of the *Evil Dead* franchise without Bruce Campbell reprising his role as Ash, the slow-witted yet fast-shooting ladies' man who feminism forgot. In Alvarez's *Evil Dead* film, Ash was entirely absent, save for a final extremely brief, unrelated catchphrase-quoting appearance in a post-credit sting that left many fans feeling cheated. Playing the rash and anti-heroic underdog, Ash represents an everyman figure for fans who have followed him through the death of his girlfriend and best friends, and even through time to a nightmarish version of Medieval England in *Army of Darkness*, the third instalment of the films. What is more, with the previous legal problems surrounding the film *Army of Darkness* now resolved, fans can look forward to relishing more medieval time travel and visits to the 'S-Mart'

² 'Special Effects', *Book of the Dead: The Definitive Evil Dead Website* <http://www.bookofthedead.ws/website/evil_dead_2_special_fx.html> [accessed 8 September 2017].

hardware store, which is one of the most memorable settings from the film, as it is the place where Ash discovers his famous shotgun or ‘boomstick’.³ Due to licensing issues, any material relating to *Army of Darkness* had to be side-stepped in Seasons One and Two of *Ash vs Evil Dead*, including changing the name of the shop to ‘Value Stop’. Nevertheless, with Ash restored as the central character in *Ash vs Evil Dead*, and with the full canon of storylines now available, Campbell enthusiasts can rejoice once more.

In Season Two, viewers are also treated to several versions of Ash, including a psychotic ‘Ashy Slashy’ hand puppet, which nods to Joss Whedon’s *Angel* episode ‘Smile Time’ (2004), in which the titular vampire is transformed into a felt puppet. Thanks to time-travel, Ash also gains the opportunity to forgo his prosthetic hand (famously self-amputated in the second *Evil Dead* film, within the same frame as Ernest Hemingway’s novel *A Farewell to Arms*, providing the most infamous visual gag of the franchise), as his real hand re-materialises in a newly emerging alternative timeline. Perhaps, now that the aforementioned legal difficulties have been overcome, the next series will feature yet another branch in the time continuum, resurrecting an *Army of Darkness*-influenced narrative with Deadite skeletons, another possessed girlfriend, and a haunted windmill.

With Season Three of *Ash vs Evil Dead* already confirmed by Starz, we can expect more Ash-related adventures soon, but there may be (potentially less positive) changes afoot. Craig DiGregorio, showrunner for the first two seasons, has left, with Mark Verheiden (of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-10) and Netflix’s *Daredevil* (2014-present)) taking over. DiGregorio reportedly faced serious creative differences with producer Robert Tapert, especially surrounding the Season-Two finale. With Tapert possibly pushing for less humour-driven and scarier future seasons, viewers must wait and see if *Ash vs Evil Dead* will encourage fans to ‘hail to the king, baby’ (as Ash would say) or reach for their boomstick in disgust.

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³ Brad Miska, ‘*Ash vs Evil Dead*: Why Doesn’t Ash Work at S-Mart?’, *Bloody Disgusting*, 14 August 2015 <<http://bloody-disgusting.com/news/3357283/doesnt-ash-work-s-mart-ash-vs-evil-dead/>> [accessed 8 September 2017].