

Zombie film 'Corpses' oozes with genuine visual horror

Movie review

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Pulse Columnist

I remember a time when horror movies used to be good. Even the bad ones were good. Some horror films, such as "The Exorcist," were even great. I don't know what happened, but at some point between "Evil Dead II" and the present, horror films turned into bland, commercial garbage. They all seem content to rerun the same boring clichés, the same visual themes and the same insipid ideas. Roger Corman made more worthwhile and original horror films in an average week than New Line Cinema has released in the past decade.

This might explain why I felt so good after seeing "House of 1,000 Corpses." It's refreshing to know that someone is trying, though not necessarily succeeding, to recapture what made some of the old horror films so much damn fun. Directed by Rob Zombie, that most visual of heavy metal stars, the movie is an amazing collection of visual excesses inspired in no small part by such classics as "Night of the Living Dead" and "The

Texas Chainsaw Massacre."

The story, so much as there is one, is standard horror film fare. A group of youths stop by a bizarre roadside attraction, "Captain Spaulding's Museum of Murderers and Madmen," and end up the victims of a twisted family of rather gleeful homicidal maniacs. Most of the focus is on the family rather than the victims, a good narrative choice, given that the victims are your standard horror film cannon fodder. They exist to be slaughtered. The family, on the other hand, is made up of an offbeat collection of loonies who, while never given any particular motive for their crimes, at least commit them with style and flourish. They are played by an equally diverse group of actors, most of whom are veterans of horror and exploitation films.

Other than its lack of any noticeable character development, the film's biggest flaw is that its visual tricks are inconsistent. It often switches into grainy digital photography to show flashbacks or anything not connected to the chronological story line. This is, at times, gruesomely effective, but too often feels like filler material. The art direction, though, deserves some kind

of special award. Zombie has created an almost surreal landscape of trash and pop culture paraphernalia left over from the past five decades. Watching the background closely can be rewarding for the amount of sly visual gags (personal favorite: a collection of "missing" posters, one of which reads "Dog Head Missing"). The fact that most of the killers are named after characters played by Groucho Marx didn't escape my attention either.

However, it is difficult to criticize this film for having filler or missing character development. The original print was 105 minutes, but had 17 minutes cut out in order to receive an R rating. Who knows what else was lost along with the gore? One of the scenes that did remain, a high angle shot showing one of the killers holding a gun to a man's head for nearly a full minute of perfect, silent tension, is so well constructed it makes you squirm in your seat. More scenes such as this could render the film a classic. As it is, it works well as enjoyable, but not perfect, entertainment for horror fans.

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Wild

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But Lula proves to be just as split. There's a "girl next door" beneath the jet black wig and gaudy jewelry. And just as Lula is there to handcuff Charlie to the bed for a night of crazy drunken sex, Charlie is there the next morning with Pepto-Bismol for her hangover. They are two welcome halves of the same coin. But that's obvious. The character revelations that follow make their need for each other even more complex and less trite. These are not characters with clearly defined goals. They are content to drift along in their own unchanging universes — more concerned with how others view them than with their own desires — unaware of their desperate need for change.

By the time the two get to Lula's high school reunion, where Charlie

poses as her husband, we have no clue where the action will take us next. Any desire to guess the outcome is replaced by a willingness to enjoy the ride.

And just when the movie seems ready to settle into a cliché road comedy, Lula's ex-husband, Ray (Ray Liotta) shows up to spin the movie off in a deeper and darker direction.

"Something Wild" is Demme's vision of America as a perverse but welcome mixture of cultures. From the obvious differences between Lula and Charlie to the dullness of the status seekers at the reunion to Ray's unchanging adolescent aggression, the movie gives us an odd cocktail of everything wonderful and obnoxious about the United States.

Demme has always had a knack for shaping characters of genuine truth. It's the reason "Silence of the Lambs" was so terrifying and

"Melvin and Howard" was so touching. He is great with actors, and from "Something Wild," one gets the sense that the characters on screen are far more than what existed on the pages of E. Max Frye's script.

The movie proves the director is at his best when he's having fun. He has since drifted from that style into more dramatic fare like "Philadelphia" and "Beloved." His recent "The Truth About Charlie" was a return to instinctive cinema but with less entertaining results.

"Something Wild" is definitely a child of the 1980s. The inherent tackiness is distracting at times but ultimately serves Demme's view of America during this period. Few movies of such day-glo clutter get richer with repeated viewing. "Something Wild" does.

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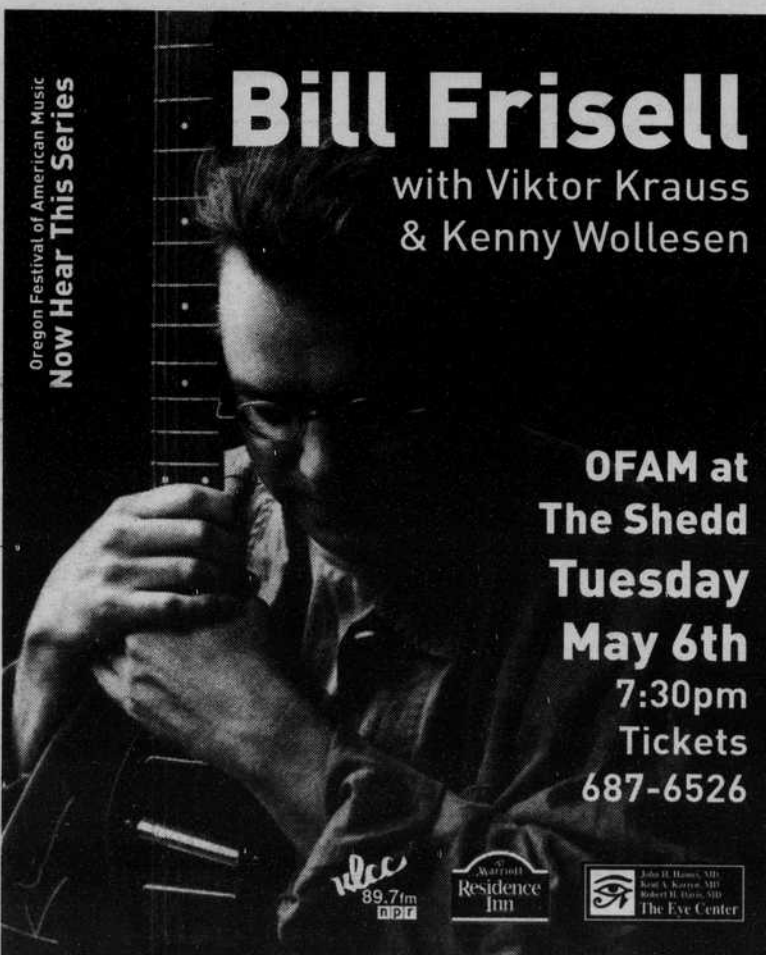
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