

Fido exceeds the expectations of the living...and the dead

By: Ashley Challinor

Posted: 3/21/07

I didn't know it was missing until I found it - there was a hole in my heart only a satirical boy-and-his-zombie film could fill. Andrew Currie's Fido is a genre mash-up, both darkly funny and twistedly sweet, desperately in need of an audience to love it. Some may be disappointed that, for a zombie flick, it has a minimum of scares and gore, but its blend of humour and horror, satire and silliness, is the key to its subtle genius.

Right from the start, with a tongue-in-cheek black-and-white "educational" short straight out of 1950s Americana, Fido sets up both its atmosphere and sense of humour in one expositional bite. The story opens nearly three decades after humanity's victory in a global zombie war, like a surreal, Technicolor version of Max Brooks' brilliant World War Z. Putting the world back on its feet after the apocalypse is the responsibility of one company, Zomcon. Not only does Zomcon ensure zombie-free towns (George Kennan would approve of its motto, "Better life through containment"), but it has also developed a collar which pacifies zombies into useful members of society - delivering newspapers, mowing lawns, serving dinner. The story opens as the Robinson family purchases their first zombie, whom misfit son Timmy (K'Sun Ray) quickly befriends, naming him Fido and teaching him to play catch. But when Fido accidentally eats a neighbour across the street, it spells trouble for the lonely boy and his undead pal.

Simply put, Fido is fantastic. It uses a simple, yet bold, colour palette to create a Pleasantville-like world our pop culture awareness places far from the realm of the living dead. Yet it fuses these visions in a way that is both hilarious and effortlessly satirical - keeping up with the Joneses in this case means having a small team of zombies to take care of one's perfect suburban house and home. Through an almost too high-concept story, Currie turns both historical and contemporary neuroses on their head, everything from homeland security to the Red Scare (Timmy and Helen declare they'd rather be zombie than dead). This society has become used to the ideas of security and invasiveness, the Dead Menace and the monopoly of Zomcon, in every aspect of society. Senior citizens are looked at with suspicion, as they may drop dead (and get right back up again) at any moment - don't trust anyone over 60. If you can afford a funeral, you're provided with a "head casket" which ensures that, in the words of a priest, "From dust you came, from dust will you return, and from dust will you not be resurrected."

It is this attitude that makes Fido work - as much as I'm loathe to declare anything "quirky", this film begs for that title. While the characters earnestly inhabit what they consider to be a normal life, the absurdity of the living dead is always along the edges - literally, in this case, as the town is surrounded by a zombie-infested "wild zone". These untamed zombies and unclaimed lands act as a reminder of the inherent insecurity of the world of the living, as well as their dependence on Zomcon for more than just zombie slave labour - for life itself. All of this darkness is frosted over with a sunny, unquestioning outlook based on nothing more than the simple desire to be alive. Bill Robinson expresses this best in a misguided father-son chat with Timmy, telling the boy to ignore all those troublesome "feelings", as "being alive is what counts" - this coming from a man who reads DEATH magazine. Humour comes from conflict, and in Fido the humour is rife with - yes, damn it! - quirky irony.

This tone is successfully enacted through the characters, who flesh out the joke and add to the giddy horror of the situation. Even though we're laughing at them, their cluelessness is endearing. The actors are essential to this, particularly their ability to take one-note figures such as a zombie or a stereotypical suburbanite and turn them into little pieces of comic genius. Loquacious Scottish comedian Billy Connelly defies, well, everything, by playing Fido, conveying more with a few grunts, groans, and looks than most of this year's Oscar winners can do unencumbered. Scene-stealing Tim Blake Nelson appears as the perverted (but also supremely awesome) neighbour Mr. Theopolis. With a Thompson-esque cigarette holder, smoking jacket, and a zombie girlfriend named Tammy, Theopolis is the personification of Fido's warped sense of humour. Similarly, professional Hey, It's That Guy! Dylan Baker is perfectly cast as Bill Robinson, the persnickety, head casket-obsessed dad traumatized by the zombification of his own father - young Bill only got one kill in the zombie wars, but it was a substantial one. His worry about the (un)death of his own family leads him to become comically distant, the model of '50s repression: when his wife excitedly kisses him on the cheek he scolds, "Helen, propriety!". Moreover, when Helen announces she's pregnant, his first reaction is to tell her that he "can't afford another funeral right now". Bill, like Theopolis, is that perfect combination of terrifying and terrific that makes a character memorable.

I would be remiss not to mention one crucial fact of Fido's existence: it's Canadian. The fact that you may have heard about it, and can go see it outside of your local art house cinema, should tell you that it is not your average Egoyan flick. Though filmed in British Columbia, it lacks the usual cast of Canuck bit players who - more than the C.N. Tower or the Vancouver skyline - mark a film as a product of Hollywood North. Nor are there any snowshoes, weird sex, ennui, or Don McKellar. Andrew Currie is one of those rare Canadian filmmakers who gets it - you can be smart and weird, but also funny and entertaining. It's the promotion and availability of more Canadian films like Fido that will encourage domestic audiences to look better upon home-grown fare.

Bottom line: Fido is hilarious, delightfully weird and yes, made my heart swell a little for Canadian film. "You crazy, wonderful zombie!" indeed.
