GRINDHOUSE

Within a few months, the Robert Rodriguez/Quentin Tarantino double-bill that composes *Grindhouse* - a three-hour paean to the joys of '70s schlock cinema - will have permanently ensconced itself on my DVD shelf, readily available for endless repeat viewing and analysis. But it's inconceivable that I'll ever again find the movie(s) as exhilarating as I did on my first viewing at the cineplex; not because the element of surprise will be missing, but because it's unlikely that any of my living-room screenings will find dozens of total strangers in attendance, and this movie demands to be seen with as large a crowd as possible. It will be thrilling to one day watch *Grindhouse* on DVD. It will also be almost completely pointless.

As much as I love Tarantino, and as much as I can occasionally get on-board with Rodriguez, I wasn't exactly salivating for *Grindhouse*, as the project just seemed too *easy*: Two 75-minute features - each celebrating and parodying the exploitative exuberance of the lowest of low-rent trash - accompanied by mock, ultra-violent "coming attractions" for extra kitsch value. The concept sounded amusing, but it also sounded amusing *at best*; what possible point could there be in reviving the sort of disreputable entertainments that the directors obviously adored in their youth? To prove that, with technological advances and multi-million-dollar budgets, the directors could make these films *better* than their original helmers did?

What I hadn't anticipated, though, was how *Grindhouse* would only be nominally interested in re-creating the movies it pays homage to; it's far more concerned with re-creating the *experience* of these movies.

Aesthetically, both *Planet Terror* and *Death Proof,* the individual features that bookend the film, have been designed to look as cruddy as possible; there are scratches on the film, tears in the

sprocket holes, and in each work, an entire reel - which constitutes between 15 and 20 minutes of footage - is missing, which "the management" apologizes for before the fact. (These absent reels, in a great joke, turn out to be the ones with the sex in them.) Yet as neither presentation is a period piece - there are references to the war in Iraq, characters are seen text-messaging one another - and as neither the acting nor writing in these features is as amateurish as that of their grade-Z forbears, it becomes clear that Rodriguez and Tarantino have something on their minds other than verisimilitude. That "something" turns out to be
us
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What both directors intrinsically understand is that movies of this ilk are designed to be *shared*; the kinetic charge of watching a zombie's brains being splattered across the landscape, or a horrific killer getting what's coming to him, just aren't the same without a pumped-up crowd there to audibly relish the sight. The pleasures of
Grindhouse
may be base ones, but they're pleasures nonetheless, and
Planet Terror
and
Death Proof
have been fashioned so extraordinarily well that not only do you feel no guilt about cheering and applauding the viscera, you'd almost feel negligent for
not
. (At the screening I attended, the finale to Tarantino's film was greeted with one of the most giddily spontaneous ovations I've ever experienced at the cineplex; you'd have thought Jennifer Hudson had just belted out "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going.") What makes
Grindhouse
a terrific movie is inseparable from what makes it a terrific
audience
movie; at least half the fun lies in sharing your shock, nausea, and unrepentant delight with others.

As it concerns an attack by gruesome, flesh-eating zombies, I was predisposed to like Rodriguez's endeavor from the start. But even as a dyed-in-the-wool zombo-phile, I was completely unprepared for the delirious, almost ridiculously disgusting blend of high and low comedy in *Planet Terror*, which might be a new high-water mark for its director, and might even provide more honest laughs than the whole of *Blades of Glory*. The "how"s and "why"s of the plotting couldn't be less important - not only does the film's missing reel excise the sex, but, hilariously, the manner in which all the characters congregate to destroy the mutants, as well as quite a bit of character backstory - and Rodriguez provides so many memorable, even iconic moments that
Planet Terror
would probably be a smash even without

Grindhouse
's '70s-era italicization.

Its smartest detail proves to be that missing reel, as it underscores Rodriguez's contention that *Planet Terror*, like its cinematic inspirations, is all about the *now*; why obsess over narrative holes when you have Rose McGowan, with a machine-gun prosthetic leg, taking out a hundred zombies while spinning on her back? The throwaway gags, here, *are* the narrative; the movie ricochets from one madly inventive sequence to another with almost no down time, and it's performed to gravely earnest perfection by McGowan, Freddy Rodriguez, Marley Shelton (whose attempt to drive a car with anesthetized hands is a tour-de-force), and Naveen Andrews (who, as *Lost* has continually suggested, currently *is* the coolest actor on the planet).

Rodriguez's feature only stumbles when its winks at the audience are too overt - when, for instance, a hot love scene literally melts the film in the projector, or when Tarantino himself makes a token, nudge-nudge appearance. (He doesn't possess the acting chops to ever convince you that he's playing anyone other than Quentin Tarantino, nor does he appear to *want* to.) But for what it is, *Planet Terror* is just about flawless. At one point, a character vocalizes her belief that everyone's "useless talents" will someday prove use*ful*. (Hysterically, McGowan's go-go dancer, and wannabe stand-up comedian, proves this several times over.) Whether they're useless is a question for discussion, but Rodriguez's own talents, it seems, have never been more prominently displayed.

Planet Terror is a pretty great feature, but Tarantino's contribution, *Death Proof*, is a *truly* great feature, roughly an hour of knuckle-whitening dread followed by 15 minutes of uninterrupted, ass-kicking joy. In the film, Kurt Russell (in a spectacularly insinuating performance) plays Stuntman Mike, who's both a charming letch and an unmitigated sociopath, yet any discussion of *De*

ath Proof
's plotting would be an audience disservice; there are shocks here that even Hitchcock, at his most diabolically fiendish, wouldn't have dreamed up. Suffice it to say that the movie delivers long stretches of the director's spectacularly profane and witty banter, the most astounding car chase in decades (and one presented
without
digital trickery), a bunch of stellar female performers - among them Rosario Dawson, Sydney Tamiia Poitier, Tracie Thoms, and professional stuntwoman Zoë Bell - and a tone of such unbridled confidence that you might find it impossible to stop grinning, even while you're clutching the armrests of your theatre seat.

And what of *Grindhouse*'s *faux* trailers, the ones proudly touting titles such as *Werewolf Women of the S.S., Machete,*
and - my personal favorite - Edgar Wright's
Don't
? (As in: "
Don't
... open the door.
Don't
... scream for help ... .") Miniature perfection. The audience (rightly) howled at these cinematic bonbons, but then again, there was very little we
didn't
howl at in
Grindhouse
. Considering its structural finesse and brilliantly funny - and affectionate - satire, the film is ripe for eventual DVD deconstruction, but
don't
... miss seeing it
now
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