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# REEL

# CRITIQUE

## Dead Alive Vidmark/Trimark Starring Timothy Balme

While the Evil Dead trilogy ("Evil Dead," "Evil Dead 2: Dead by Dawn" and "Army of Darkness") has garnered a huge fan following, few people have seen or heard about a movie that single-handedly outshines the previously mentioned classic trilogy. "Dead Alive," also known as "Brain Dead," reigns supreme as the best B-level schlock zombie movie to come out of New Zealand. Written and directed by Peter Jackson ("Lord of the Rings"), "Dead Alive" is pure unadulterated fun.

"Dead Alive" tells the tragic story of Lionel (Timothy Balme), who is plagued by his live-in mother (Elizabeth Moody). When a pretty young store clerk named Paquita (Diana Penhalver) enters his life, the two fall in love.

While on a date, Lionel's mom follows the couple to the zoo and is bitten by a horribly stop-motion animated rat-monkey. As any horror movie fan knows, being bitten by a rat-monkey is never good news. For dear old mom, this means a slow, agonizing death filled with exploding pus and rotting skin falling into your meals. Lionel's shock and sadness at his mom's death is short-lived because her demise is soon followed by her rebirth as an ever-hungry zombie. Soon, she is spreading her disease, abundantly creating more and more zombies in the process. Lionel finds himself in a pickle. He does not want to kill his mother's zombie, and is forced to keep her ever-increasing number of sired zombies locked up in a basement. As the number of zombies in the basement grows, things turn from bad to worse as Lionel's dead-beat Uncle Les returns. Les manages to blackmail Lionel into turning over his house to him, and Les promptly throws a party at his new abode. That's where the real fun begins.

With such a simple plot, Jackson manages to milk "Dead Alive" for all it's worth, creating a zombie opus that features some of the goriest scenes captured on film, putting even "Kill Bill" to shame. Incredible effects and stunning camera angles manage to keep the tempo of the film moving beyond the clichéd zombie flick that has haunted George Romero and company.

In one scene, Lionel uses a lawnmower to mow down an overwhelming hoard of zombies. Playing obvious homage to Sam Rami's "Evil Dead" films, "Dead Alive" manages to seem fresh even in the face of such a well-plunged sub-genre. Plot points such as the zombie baby created by the unholy union of two zombies and a kung-fu fighting priest will shock and entertain audiences craving something a little different this Halloween.

With laughable acting that justly fits the film's self-deprecating tone, "Dead Alive" is a B movie in all aspects of the title. Witty humor and gruesome sight gags abound in this amusing film. With a potential Academy Award in the cards for Jackson for "Lord of the Rings: Return of the King," fans may want to check out his earlier effort for a chance to scream, thrill, cheer and laugh their heads off.



-- Robert Saucedo

## Dagon Lion's Gate Films Starring Ezra Godden

The rain pours down, encompassing the street. Claustrophobia permeates the atmosphere as Paul Marsh (Ezra Godden) stumbles through the street. He is dripping wet with rain and blood. As Paul continues his mad quest for sanctuary from his pursuers, he glances behind him to see the fish-people who follow are gaining. While the plot may sound like some bizarre relic from the time of 40-foot tall ants and killer shrews, "Dagon" is a grotesquely intriguing thriller with enough bizarre imagery to fill a dozen Stephen King novels.

Based upon the work of author H.P. Lovecraft, a master of the macabre and supernatural, "Dagon" is the story of Paul, who with his girlfriend and friends crashes on the shore of a coastal Spanish town. As night falls, Paul and his friends are hunted by the mysterious fish-people who live in the shadows of the town. In order to survive, Paul must discover the town's dark secret, a mystery wherein lies the dark god of the sea, Dagon.

This tripped-out story may seem enough to leave viewers scratching their heads with befuddlement, but the plot is laid out at a leisurely pace that allows the suspense to grow. The momentum and danger builds to a crescendo, leaving viewers on a roller coaster trip of a cinematic experience.

Having previously directed other stories by Lovecraft, director Stuart Gordon is an old hand at capturing the bizarre intensity of the mythology Lovecraft creates in his stories. Gordon excels at crafting an ominous feeling of impending doom that will leave the audience glancing behind their shoulders along with the hapless Paul. Utilizing the oppressiveness of torrential rain to its full advantage, Gordon manages to project a feeling of hopelessness and pessimism that will leave viewers doubting the safety of any victims.

"Dagon" features sub-par acting from its leads, but the noticeable

lack of skill is never distracting as the directing and over-the-top bizarreness make up for poor delivery of lines. What does stand out is the amazing use of prosthetics and special effects to create the human-fish hybrids. Tentacles and gills abound as the mutated townspeople come out of the woodwork. While the particular combination of a fish and a human may not seem threatening, the sight of a man with webbed fingers and gills on his neck serves to scare the willies out of any person. The icing on the cake is the town's local princess, a girl with a mass of swarming tentacles for a lower torso, an effect that will freak the heck out of spectators.

The movie also features the perfect location and set extras. The altered townspeople who stumble and lurch throughout the rain-soaked streets weave a perfect background for the fantastic story taking center stage.

This film's atmosphere is clearly the standout. The sometimes cheesy plot and bad acting might have spelled disaster for any lesser director or writer, but Gordon works with Dennis Paoli's adaptation of Lovecraft to offer a creepiest perfect for a late night excursion into the celluloid supernatural.



-- Robert Saucedo

## Donnie Darko Fox Starring Jake Gyllenhaal

Many people do not like to be scared by horror movies and turn their noses up at ghosts and goblins. October can be a bad time for these cineplex chickens. Cable networks and video stores frequently feature nothing but the most shock-inducing films they have available just in time for Halloween. For those movie fans looking for a seasonal picture that will offer few chills, "Donnie Darko" is the movie to choose. "Donnie Darko" is a cerebral flick that for the most part foregoes the cheap scare, offering instead a night of debate and contemplation over the movie's bizarre meaning.

Written and directed by Richard Kelly, "Donnie Darko" tells the story of a troubled youth named Donnie Darko (Jake Gyllenhaal), who is plagued by a torrid mental history. One night, Donnie is spared when a jet engine falls into his empty bedroom. Donnie was not in his bedroom because he was talking to a giant rabbit. What follows is a bizarre mind trip through the potential last days on Earth.

The intriguing plot offers an appetizing meal for the mind with unpredictable twists and turns. The giant rabbit from the future tells Donnie the world will end in a few days, and Donnie must prevent Armageddon. It's a shame the rabbit didn't pick a more mentally stable person to unload this news onto. Donnie is too busy spending time with girlfriend Gretchen (Jena Malone) and battling a motivational speaker with a secret played by Patrick Swayze.

This independent film features amazing camera work that offers an emotional punch and stunning visuals. The film also features a collection of remarkable special effects that is a testament to the tenacity of a filmmaker on a small budget. The real standout is the music. With a soundtrack that features a collection of excellent songs from the 80s including tracks by Echo and the Bunnymen, Tears for Fears and Duran Duran, the movie's haunting soundtrack perfectly complements its somber tone.

Looking ever much like Toby Maguire's evil twin, Jake Gyllenhaal leaves audiences squirming in their seats when he is onscreen. With excellent acting from all involved, "Donnie Darko" is a stunning piece of cinema that critics have hailed one of the best movies of 2001.

The film has managed to garner a huge fan following in the few years it's been on video. It's no surprise why; the movie is a wonderful flick with a memorable ending that will trouble viewers long after the conclusion has past. Viewers should watch this film in a large group to feel the full effect, because the group is sure to debate the movie's ending.

"Donnie Darko" is not a movie for everyone. Not your traditional Halloween film, it is tragic, funny and mesmerizing. With a few chills sprinkled in, more patient horror junkies will not be bored, and for those who have grown beyond the promise of fleeting scares that permeate the latest slasher films, "Donnie Darko" promises a moving experience that will be remembered as one of the best gothic horror films created. Director Richard Kelly is a rising star to watch.



-- Robert Saucedo

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