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Zombies take Havana in 'Juan of the Dead'

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MIAMI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Alexis Diaz de Villegas is a zombie hunter in the Cuban horror-comedy 'Juan of the Dead.'

In Juan of the Dead, the zombie epidemic that has contaminated popular culture in movies, books and TV shows around the world finally makes it to Cuba.

But when the dead start rising from their graves to eat the living, island dwellers react in unique ways. The government and news media claim the zombies are dissidents, agents of American imperialism. The likable layabouts Juan (Alexis Díaz de Villegas) and Lazaro (Jorge Molina) assume the monsters are vampires and try stuffing garlic cloves into their mouths and

staking them through the heart. An elderly lady thinks the breakout is the result of "all the out-of-date medicines they give out at the polyclinic."

And another woman takes in the sight of hungry, disheveled people stumbling around the streets of a crumbling Havana and shrugs. "Looks the same as ever to me!"

The first live-action horror-genre picture ever made in Cuba, Juan of the Dead is the hottest ticket at this year's Miami International Film Festival, where it plays Friday night at Gusman Center for the Performing Arts.

"This will be the movie's first theatrical showing since Outsider Pictures acquired the U.S. distribution rights in January," said Jaie Laplante, executive director of the festival, which is presented by Miami-Dade College. "And the film will premiere exclusively at the Tower Theater in Little Havana on March 13, for people who can't make it to the festival."

Juan of the Dead, which pays loving homage to the beloved zombie spoof Shaun of the Dead, has already earned high praise from the hardcore horror crowd. When it screened at the Leeds Film Festival in England last year, Twitchfilm.com's Eight Brooks wrote "[the movie] is slick, professional, raucous entertainment, laconically smart and hilariously profane by turns, and more than stands on its own two decaying feet."

But what will push the picture over in Miami and make it a must-see here are the cultural and political subtexts that take brash swipes at everything from Castro's revolution to American capitalism.

"It's interesting," writer-director Alejandro Brugués said by telephone from Havana. "When you watch the movie with a horror audience, they laugh at jokes and gags other people don't recognize. But when you watch it with a Cuban audience that doesn't know about zombie films, they laugh at completely different things. My favorites are the scene in which everyone laughs together."

In one of those scenes, Juan and Lazaro, who start a lucrative zombie-killing business, are rounded up by police, forced to strip and carted away in a paddy wagon, handcuffed by the wrist to several other suspects.

Then one of the detainees turns out to be infected with the zombie sickness and takes a big chomp out of the guy chained next to him. The virus spreads inside the moving vehicle with hair-raising speed, because there's nowhere to run and everyone is nude and vulnerable.

"I wanted to make a good zombie movie that appeased the needs of the genre and had situations you've never seen before, like that sequence or the scene in which see the bottom of ocean floor is filled with zombies walking towards Miami," said Brugués, who will attend the festival screening on Friday. "This movie goes to extremes, because the best horror films do that. When we premiered the movie at the Toronto Film Festival in September, one review destroyed us. They called us misogynistic, ageist, racist, homophobic — everything you can think of. But that happens when you're making a comedy that goes pretty dark and pushes the limits. I'm just trying to make a good zombie movie. I'm not trying to offend anyone."

Juan of the Dead cost \$3 million — a measly budget by Hollywood standards, but Titanic-sized in Cuba — and features elaborate makeup and CGI effects. Because movies of this kind have never been made on the island, teams from Mexico and Spain flew in to handle the gore and large-scale mayhem.

But Brugués also used his own creativity to pull off many practical effects on the set (including the hero's unfortunate attempt to use a harpoon gun to kill a zombie), and he choreographed several sequences that shatter the traditional Cuban style of talky, character-driven movies. In one fantastic shot, the camera does a 360-degree turn around Juan, capturing the zombie mayhem breaking out all over the city. In another memorable image, hordes of the undead are decapitated in one swift stroke under a giant mural of Che Guevara that reads "Until victory, always."

"The previous generation of Cuban filmmakers were influenced by older movies, and their work reflected that," Brugués said. "But I grew up watching Star Wars and Jaws and Indiana Jones and Dawn of the Dead and Peter Jackson movies. Those are the kind of movies that influence my aesthetic. Juan of the Dead is my tribute to Shaun of the Dead, which is my favorite zombie movie."

When you ask Brugués how, exactly, he was able to watch these films in Cuba, he laughs and then confesses. Sort of.

"I could write an entire book about that subject," he said. "It has always been difficult to find these movies here. But since I was a kid, I have found ways. When you hear there's a great new zombie movie out of Japan, you have to see it for yourself. So you figure it out."

That's the same attitude the characters in Juan of the Dead take toward their plight. No matter what obstacle the zombie epidemic throws at them, they come up with a solution. Survival is the predominant theme of all zombie movies. But it has also been the central theme of all post-revolution Cuban films. Using zombies as a metaphor, Brugués was able to explore the subject with uncommon honesty and pointed humor.

"When I sat down to write the movie, I didn't censor myself in any way," he said. "And I didn't do it on the set, either. Historically, all zombie movies have social subtexts, beginning with George A. Romero. I wanted to maintain that tradition and make mine about Cuba. Because if it was going to be just another generic horror movie, then you could just shoot it anywhere."

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