

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: Movie Review: **Grindhouse - Planet Terror/Death Proof** – A look at the exciting new retro-style double feature from directors Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino – May 2007

In a past Thoughts For The Month column about the 1980's B-horror movies **Chopping Mall** and **Night of the Comet** (see TFTM July 2006) I used the phrase "back in the day" quite a few times. That phrase once again seems appropriate in discussing **Grindhouse**, the most recent collaboration from filmmakers Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino. The two movies in this double bill are Rodriguez's **Planet Terror** and Tarantino's **Death Proof**, each of which is stylistically reminiscent of movies made in the golden era of the Drive-ins and Drive-in cinema. As many know, lower-budget fare (often called B-movies) once found a home at the Drive-ins, and later during the home video revolution on VHS. (*As I talked about in the aforementioned column, I discovered movies like **Chopping Mall** and **Night of the Comet** at home on VHS tape and on pay cable). The use of this retro-style makes **Grindhouse** differ quite a bit from the typical big-budget event movie often seen today at multiplex theaters. At the same time, the picture is a unique and daring event in itself that is well worth some serious discussion.

The first half of the **Grindhouse** double bill is the zombie opus **Planet Terror**. This film is an action-packed horror romp complete with all the exploitation movie trimmings one could want including copious amounts of blood and gore, exploding heads, severed limbs, sexy women, nudity and more. The main plot concerns a chemically-caused zombie outbreak of epic proportions which involves the plight of several interesting characters. The cast is a big strength of this movie and is headed up by Rose McGowan as Go-Go dancer Cherry, and Freddy Rodriguez as her mysterious gun-toting ex-boyfriend Wray. Other recognizable actors on hand are Michael Biehn as the local sheriff, Jeff Fahey as his brother J.T., Josh Brolin and Marley Shelton as husband and wife doctors whose marriage is in shambles, and Bruce Willis as an army officer bent on

controlling the situation at all costs. Makeup effects wizard (and genre favorite) Tom Savini also appears as a Deputy. The leads are both very good with sexy Rose McGowan steaming up the screen and at the same time giving a very believable and often heartfelt performance as a woman whose hopes and dreams have somehow slipped away from her. She is equal parts sultry and tough, and the sequences with her machine-gun leg (as highlighted on the movie poster and in ads) are both funny and exciting. Rodriguez is equally impressive as the man-of-few-words Wray, while some of his lines, delivered in a low deadpan, are memorable to say the least. And while I could go on at length about the rest of the diverse cast, suffice it to say the other players are all right on the money in their roles as well.

Besides the excellent cast in ***Planet Terror***, I also thought the zombie action in the film was first-rate. **Thanks partly to the directorial prowess of Rodriguez, and partly to the work of the always reliable KNB FX team, the zombie scenes are fast-moving, suspenseful and ultra grotesque. Standout moments include a sequence reminiscent of ***Night of the Living Dead*** with a group of people trapped inside a house, and a bit where a helicopter chops off several zombie heads ala ***Day of the Dead***. It was also refreshing to see the abundant use of prosthetic makeup effects as opposed to the typical CGI (computer-generated imagery) usually on display nowadays. *** And of course this entirely fit the retro-style of the film, as did the use of some synthesizer music that immediately made me think of early John Carpenter films and Euro-horror classics featuring the music of the rock band Goblin. Simply put, I had very little to complain about, except for perhaps thinking some references to current world events and people (actually components of the plot) seemed a bit at odds with the otherwise 1970's/80's feel of the film. However aside from this minor quibble I found ***Planet Terror*** to be an extremely well-made, exciting, and incredibly enjoyable zombie movie. It's a must-see for B-movie, horror film, and action film fans alike. And speaking of action...

The second half of the ***Grindhouse*** double bill is the road movie ***Death Proof*** starring veteran actor Kurt Russell as the almost likable, smooth-talking, but extremely crazy Stuntman Mike. Appearing at first to be a shadowy stalker in an ominous black car, he later introduces himself to some lovely young ladies in a local bar and claims to be a former stuntman from several old television series starring the likes of the late Robert Urich. His bad-ass black car suggests this could be true, because it is indeed reinforced throughout making it "Death Proof" (as he puts it). The ladies include a likable blonde (Rose McGowan again), and a group of friends who talk endlessly about guys, sex and drugs. It would be spoiling it to tell exactly what happens after Stuntman Mike meets these women, but suffice it to say things take a very nasty turn. And in the second half of the film things take another nasty (but exciting) turn when he meets a second trio of ladies, two of which turn out to be road daredevils in their own right. Other recognizable faces in ***Death Proof*** include Rosario Dawson and ***Final Destination 3*** lead Mary Elizabeth Winstead, as well as an appearance by director Quentin Tarantino (who also stars in ***Planet Terror***).

In general I didn't like this movie as much as ***Planet Terror***. This is mostly because the film is a bit talky from start to finish and I didn't find the first trio of ladies, with the exception of Rose McGowan's character, all that interesting or likable. While I realize that Tarantino specializes in fast-moving, ultra-hip characters having fast-moving, ultra-hip conversations, here the style didn't totally grab me until the second half of the film. However during that second half things definitely got more interesting, and the no-holds

barred, pedal-to-the-floor action sequence that rounds out the film made it all worth while. And this movie certainly evoked that 1970's road movie feel, which was very enjoyable.

One other point worth mentioning is that prior to and between the two movies there are fake movie trailers. The titles are "Machete", "Werewolf Women of the SS", "Don't" and "Thanksgiving", and they are all hilarious. Look for appearances from actors in the main movies as well as the likes of genre favorite Udo Kier and Hollywood heavyweight Nicholas Cage. This was a very nice touch to say the least.

Overall **Grindhouse** is an incredible production, the likes of which hasn't been seen on movie screens in quite some time. Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino prove once again to be true talents who really love genre movies, and their films evoke the days of yesteryear while at the same time being larger than life spectacles. **** The extra added touches like film scratches, missing reels, jumps in the picture, and even a film "blowout", make the proceedings all the more memorable. And while the three-hour plus running time may be a bit much for some, the movies definitely justify it and do not disappoint. Kudos to everyone involved with this project. This is one double bill not to miss.

* As I talk about on my biography page, I actually became a horror film fan primarily as a result of discovering the movie **A Nightmare on Elm Street** on home video in the mid 1980's. Some other famous horror movies I discovered for the first time on home video include **The Evil Dead** and its sequels, and the 1970's Wes Craven/Sean Cunningham classic **Last House on the Left**.

** I was impressed to see that Robert Rodriguez also served as writer, cinematographer and editor on **Planet Terror** as well as directing it. It's not often nowadays to see someone perform all these duties on a studio picture.

*** "Euro-Horror" is a term used to categorize horror movies made in the European film community. For more on this topic see my September 2004 TFTM column titled "Euro-Horror and the films of Dario Argento: An alternative to the mainstream".

**** I found it amusing to see the sign near the ticket booth pointing out that these elements (film scratches, missing film reels, etc.) were intentional.