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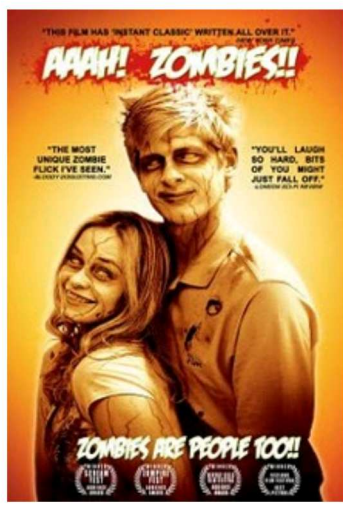
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Movie Review: Aaah! Zombies!!

Posted by Hal C F Astell at 12:28 AM



OK, so how seriously are we supposed to take a movie called *Aaah! Zombies!!*? Well, not very seriously at all, but co-writer/director Matthew Kohnen had to retitle it to persuade a distributor to release it Stateside so we'll allow him some leeway. Originally the film was named *Wasting Away*, a neat title which explains a few clever nuances in the story, and indeed that's what it was released as in Europe back in 2007, but apparently that name was too subtle for US audiences, thus the change. Kohnen isn't complaining though because it almost guarantees his film will top any alphabetical list of zombie films you can conjure up. It deserves to be noticed too, not for being a great film (it falls apart soon

after halfway) but because it comes up with something new and cool that has every possibility of influencing the genre more than any of the other new and cool concepts zombie flicks tend to come up with every time I blink. Only time will tell, I guess.

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We begin traditionally with obvious nods to the film's two chief influences. The setup is notably similar to *Return of the Living Dead*, the zombie apocalypse unleashed through the accidental release of a chemical used in a failed military experiment. Collected up in barrels labelled 'Bulk Infant Formula: Perishable', Serum XT1258 is driven off to be dumped but one of those barrels shakes loose and ends up outside Kingpins bowling alley where it seeps into some Happy Times ice cream base. However it all looks more like *Night of the Living Dead*, with zombies shambling along in black and white, though with the addition of the toxic chemical coloured green in the same selective way the girl's coat in *Schindler's List* was coloured red. The real story is hinted at in the title graphics, which suggest that zombies might be the next step in our evolutionary path. It's just surprising that we stay in black and white (and green) for a while after that.

We stay there to be introduced to our lead characters, four of them. They're friends who waste their lives at Kingpins, though I'm not sure how many actually work there. Mike is the life of the party sort, played by Matthew Davis from *The Vampire Diaries*. He firmly believes that he's 'destined for greatness' but is content to just sit back and wait for it to be thrust upon him. Given that he sat back long enough for his cellphone to be cut off suggests it isn't too likely. Vanessa, his ex-girlfriend, is much more of a go getter, but while she's sure she's going places she hasn't gone there yet. Tim has worked his way up to being a Kingpins assistant manager, though he's just a soft hearted wuss. That endears him to Cindy though, who should have been his girlfriend ten years ago but somehow neither of them quite made it happen. She's a bleeding heart who thinks that glue traps are inhumane to rats. Someone should introduce her to Corey Feldman.

It's only after they eat some of Mike's beer flavoured ice cream, so ingesting some of the toxic zombieifying serum, dying horribly shaky deaths and being promptly resurrected from the dead that the film takes the leap ir key to it all is perspective. In black and white, they're the standar

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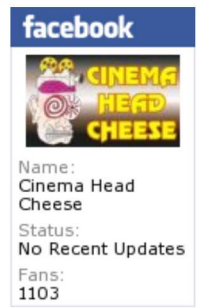
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don't have the slightest clue what's happened to them. They think they're fine. They can talk happily among themselves. Their feelings to one another don't change, though some of their drives do evolve: suddenly eating brains just seems natural. They merely can't interact with anyone or anything else, at least not very well. It's like reality unfolds at a different pace. People run away really fast and they talk like Donald Duck on speed.

The first clues of their new status come when they meet Nick Steele, dedicated American soldier. He's one of them and he has a motorcycle handlebar stuck through his chest to prove it. He sees the problem at hand as being due to 'toxic leftovers from a misguided military project', but like our four wasted heroes, he sees himself as normal. It's everyone else who's infected and he's out to save the day. Colby French plays him very much as John Goodman would, perhaps partly because we're set around a bowling alley. He overplays everything. He's all about the integrity and honour of the military, deadly serious in intent but accidentally hilarious. 'I'm well trained for espionage,' he says, putting on a sombrero to go undercover as a Mexican waiter, to inevitable failure. 'There is a code,' he repeats, 'the mission over the man.' With the zombie apocalypse, he finally finds the opportunity to be a hero, not realising that he's a hero on the wrong side.

But then the magic of this setup is that there are no right and wrong sides. This is the movie that really highlights that zombies might just be people too, even more than shorts like *Gay Zombie*, *Cupcake: A Zombie Lesbian Musical* or *Rising Up: The Story of the Zombie Rights Movement*. Our four main zombies are a glorious counterpart to Steele's lone wolf routine. They group hug. They don't know what ASAP means. They make brain margaritas. Yet it's by being turned into zombies that they actually find themselves. Suddenly they're what Steele labels super soldiers and they wonder what the downside is, as they start achieving as the undead what they couldn't achieve as living human beings. And all this is great fun to watch. It's well written, funny and astute, with a quirky new ZombieVision concept that makes us think. It's capably shot, despite what was not much of a budget, though the filmmakers won't reveal just how low it went.

For just over half the running time, it runs on like a little gem of an indie, and we haven't even seen Tracey Walter yet. There are names here, albeit not huge ones. Matthew Davis is the star, having made the odd quality picture in and amongst things like *Pearl Harbor*, *BloodRayne* and *S Darko*, the unwanted *Donnie Darko* sequel, and he's decent here. Michael Grant Terry and Betsy Beutler are capable as Tim and Cindy. I've enjoyed his work on *Bones* for the last couple of years and you may have seen her on *The Black Donnellys* or *Scrubs* and its spinoff. More experienced names like Richard Riehle and Tracey Walter are spot on in parts that are too small to relish. Yet Julianna Robinson outshines them all, without any real experience to speak of. As Vanessa, she has little to do, but she impresses nonetheless with a calm confidence that serves as the real grounding for all the lead characters. I look forward to seeing more of her in the future.

Unfortunately, *Aaah! Zombies!!* can't keep up to the standard it sets itself early on. While there are some decent scenes in the second half, like the one where Nick Steele is confronted with the reality he doesn't want to see, mostly it just falls apart. Matthew Kohnen and his brother Sean, who co-wrote and co-produced the film, seem to forget what they had that made it special and become content to merely spoof other films instead, apparently at random. It doesn't take long for us to lose track of what's going on: one moment we're in a college comedy version of *The Big Lebowski*, then we begin heading off into a rather strange episode of *The A-Team*, only to find ourselves in, of all things, *Exodus* instead. Worst of all, the logistics are utterly forgotten and plot inconsistencies begin to proliferate like the zombie menace itself. Colby French stops being John Goodman and morphs into John Belushi. It's all too confusing for words and it just doesn't seem to care. At least the first half was consistent and if you pick this one up, that's what you'll enjoy.

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