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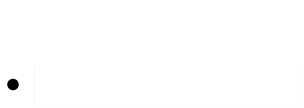


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Stoners battle zombies in Bong of the Dead

\$5,000 pipe dream blazes onto silver screen

By Brenda Jones, Contributing writer August 9, 2011

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Bong of the Dead screens at the Rio Theatre Aug. 19.

Photograph by: submitted, for the Courier

In filmmaking, \$20 million would be considered a low budget for an action film. Horror films generally cost less to produce with the 2009 blockbuster *Zombieland* spending \$23 million and *Shaun of the Dead* a modest \$4 million. By comparison, Vancouver filmmaker Thomas Newman's \$5,000 budget for his zombie film *Bong of the Dead* is considered a "micro-budget."

Newman wrote, directed, produced, and did all the post-production work, on *Bong of the Dead*. By all rights, he should look like a zombie after spending two years in his basement completing the film once it was shot.

"I worked on this for two years, 24 hours a day, lost a bunch of weight and looked awful by the end," Newman says. "I wanted a home run from day one."

Newman's friends and film industry colleagues are quick with praise for the film, which offers production values that far surpass what anyone would reasonably expect from a paltry \$5,000. Much of that is thanks to special effects makeup artist Mike Fields, who became co-producer of the film after contributing approximately \$200,000 worth of special effects makeup and zombie body parts. For those looking for gore, a meal scene early in the film is memorably gruesome and disgusting—enough to give the rest of us indigestion.

"We wanted to keep it true to the makeup, because I knew we could do a really good job with that, which is why we shot it during the day in bright sunlight, instead of at night," Newman says.

Newman wanted the film to be a cool twist on the zombie genre, but not a spoof. *Bong of the Dead* is a bit like

Cheech and Chong meets Shaun of the Dead, but stripped of some of the witty banter and clever insights from the latter film.

Bong of the Dead is set after meteorites crash into the earth and turn most people into zombies. Surviving this supernatural disaster are a couple of pot-heads, Tommy (played by stand-up comic Jy Harris) and Edwin (played by Mark Wynn), who discover that zombie brains can be used as fertilizer to grow a super-potent, fast-growing form of marijuana. They set out on a quest to kill zombies in order to produce more super-weed for themselves.

The stoners' road trip gets rocky when they encounter a zombie mastermind who is trying to raise an army of zombies to take over the world and wipe out humans. Evil Alex (played by Barry Nerling) holds the pair captive, until they escape and meet another survivor, Leah (played by Simone Bailly), who—when the trio isn't flirting, fighting, drinking or getting high—helps them fight Alex's army.

Newman hopes the film will appeal to a mass audience, in addition to pot smokers and zombie film enthusiasts.

“There are a lot of underground zombie fans,” Newman said. “I had no idea how big it was until I did this film.”

Zombie fans won't be disappointed by this film, which features several dramatic kill scenes and special effects one would expect of a much larger production.

The \$5,000 budget was spent on feeding the cast and crew for the 15 days it took to shoot the film, as well as supplies. All the actors worked for free, Newman used locations provided by family members, and the crew dedicated their time as well. The biggest roadblock in getting the film completed was when a friend, who had volunteered to do all the post-production work, dropped out. Newman learned post-production computer programs in order to composite the 375 shots and complete the project.

“People don't realize how difficult it is to create a film,” Newman says. “After this, I know I can push myself to do anything. My main goal is to get famous making movies.”

Newman is now working on getting Bong of the Dead distributed in the U.S., U.K., Canada and Japan. In the meantime, it was an official selection of the 2011 Cannes Independent Film Festival and will be released in Australia, Belgium and the Netherlands in October.

Bong of the Dead screens Aug. 19, 6:30 p.m. at the Rio theatre, 1660 East Broadway, appearing before the Zombie Short Film and Video Competition. Tickets and info at bongofthedead.com.

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