

Bath Salt Zombies

I must be getting old. Last spring, when it was widely reported that a homeless man in Miami had his face chewed off by a bath-salt abuser, my first impression was that Epsom salts and other bathtub additives somehow could turn a mild-mannered dope fiend into a flesh-eating ghoul. It was a new one on me, but, having lived through the electric-banana craze of the 1960s, I reserved judgment. According to the coroner assigned to the case, the “cannibal” who was shot and killed by police that day had nothing resembling bath salts in his system ... some residue marijuana, yes, but not the designer drug known on the street as “bath salts.” That substance, which contains synthetic cathinones, looks enough like Epsom salts to have been accorded the name by enterprising dope dealers. No one is precisely sure how it works, but, worse case, it has been known to induce behavior similar to that attributed to cocaine, speed and PCP. It’s just as possible that car-wash employee Rudy Eugene was having a really, really bad day at the office when he attacked 65-year-old Ronald Poppo. Possibly to deflect questions about whether or not the cop used his sidearm when other options might have been available, a Miami police spokesman presented the bath-salts story to the media, which couldn’t wait to run with it. They’d done the same thing in the 1930s, when marijuana and hemp were outlawed based primarily on the premise that Satan grows the stuff in the Back 40 of hell and sells it to kids.

Sometime very soon after the news of the Miami Cannibal broke, production began on a crazy DIY movie, “**Bath Salt Zombies**.” It could very well be the first such film to capitalize on both the “epidemic” and zombie-movie craze. Although made on budget that topped out at an estimated \$5,000, it bears a resemblance to “Reefer Madness,” in that it combines what’s known about the drug with a wildly over-the-top cautionary tale. Although crude by most cinematic standards, “Bath Salt Zombies” is strangely entertaining and surprisingly coherent. I say, “surprisingly,” because do-it-yourself auteur Dustin Mills’ previous films – “Night of the Tentacles,” “Zombie A-Hole” and “The Puppet Monster Massacre” – went out of their way to defy good taste, logic and most other cinematic conventions. As conceived by co-writer Clint Weiler, a preppy-looking street dealer convinces a customer to try some bath-salt cigarettes and, of course, they have the least-desired effect on the young man. After being turned on by his voluptuous girlfriend, who reacts to the drug by climbing on a bed and doing a striptease, he chews off her face. In a concurrent throughline, a SWAT team is preparing to raid the underground pharmacist responsible for bringing bath salts to the USA. That things don’t turn out exactly as planned for anyone involved is a good thing here. Like the vast majority of DIY efforts, the lower your expectations, the more fun you’ll have watching “Bath Salt Zombies.” The DVD includes Mills’ commentary, which should be of interest to aspiring horror directors, who will never have enough money to afford film school.

- Gary Dretzka

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