

SALUTE TO THE LIVING DEAD

A *Dawn* to Remember
Dawn of the Dead and
Me and My Wife
By Max Allan Collins

Max Allan Collins is the author of the celebrated graphic novel *Road to Perdition*, source for the Academy Award-winning film. His *Quarry* series generated the festival favorite film *The Last Lullaby* [VS #74], starring Tom Sizemore and co-written by Collins. He and his wife Barbara write the *Trash 'n' Treasures* mysteries, most recently *Antiques Bizarre*.

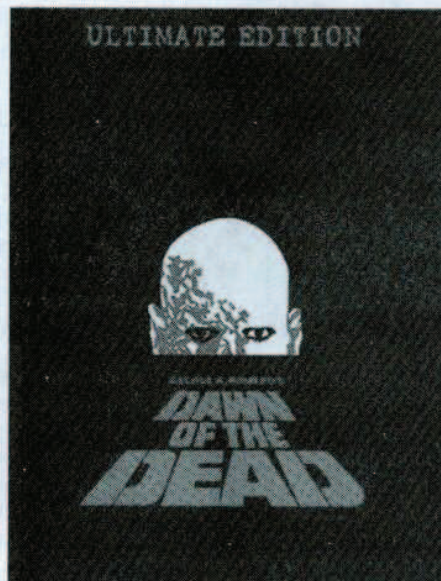
I CAN'T SAY WHY *NIGHT OF THE Living Dead* didn't work particularly well for me when it first came out. I think I never recovered from the opening "They're coming to get you, Barbara!" sequence, which struck me as painfully amateurish. I do remember the siege built sufficient suspense, with sufficient shocks, to almost turn my opinion around, but not quite. For a while, I was in the "What's the big fuss about?" camp.

As somebody who'd grown up on "Monster Horror Chiller Theater" fare on TV, and who spent a lot of his high-school years at drive-ins (sometimes even watching the movies), I was not particularly impressed with the low-budget aspect of *Night*. I'd seen a lot of low-budget genre movies, probably all of Corman and about every low-rent quickie that got thrown on a movie screen in the late '60s, and to me *Night* was just another horror picture.

My opinion has changed over the years, particularly since I've done some very low-budget filmmaking myself and have a better understanding of what Romero accomplished. And obviously he unleashed a popular-culture interest in zombies that has steadily grown over the decades worldwide. This in itself indicates that initially shrugging off *Night* as just another low-budget horror quickie was not my most insightful moment.

Even so, my love for Romero's work begins not with *Night*, but with the far more accomplished *Dawn of the Dead*. No one can deny that *Night* opened the door; but *Dawn* changed the world. Loud, brash, colorful, with a unique score, the film was a revelation of Romero's powers. The level of violence—which managed the impossibility of seeming more realistic than anything seen before and cartoonishly, blackly comic—was startling, and somehow exhilarating.

I don't remember how I managed to get my wife Barb to go to the film. Perhaps I'd read enough to know that *Dawn* had a satirical element, and since Barb and I did a lot of



shopping at malls in those days, the setting (and the social commentary it promised) was an allure. For a lot of years I couldn't get Barb to go to any movie that was overtly violent—she had become furious with me over three movies I'd taken her to: *Deliverance*, *Frenzy* and especially *The Honeymoon Killers*. She suffered some psychological abuse as a kid, and those movies did not sit well.

So, again, what she was doing at *Dawn of the Dead*, I can't tell you. But she was there, all right...and she loved it—had no problem whatsoever with the gore level, probably because of the laughter that accompanied all the scares, plus the sheer outrageousness of it all, and I know she got a kick out of seeing zombies trudge around the mall in an all too familiar way. George Romero freed her up to see all sorts of movies, and for that alone I thank him.

Dawn is also notable for its strong adventure element, and this has been an aspect of all of Romero's subsequent zombie films (though *Night*, oddly, does not quite qualify). It's often noted that Romero owes a debt to Richard Matheson's classic novel *I Am Legend* (Matheson has been one of my favorite authors since junior high), and it's the adventure element of that book that for me most strongly resonates in *Dawn* and subsequent Romero zombie yarns.

Not surprisingly, many of the films whose primary source is Romero and his zombies (*Zombieland* being a key example) lean heavily on the Matheson-derived adventure story that is the stubbornly beating heart of *Dawn of the Dead*. ☞

MONDO ROMERO

Although *Dead* dean George Romero has cut back on cameos in his own pics, you can spy him onscreen in the 2008 Teutonic zombie opus *Dead Eyes Open*, new from Troma Entertainment. Looks like redubbed convention footage and interviews, with George offering sage advice re coping with a new *Living Dead* outbreak. Essential viewing for GR completists.

DAWN REVISITED: FAN OF THE DEAD

FAN OF THE DEAD (2009) ☞ ☞ 1/2
D: Nicolas Garreau. David Emge, Ken Foree, Jim Krut, Lenny Lies. 60 mins. (Cheezy Flicks) 7/10

Young French *Deadhead* Garreau's diary of his dream journey from Gaul to Pennsylvania's celebrated celluloid zombie sites may sport vanity-video production values but should be of solid interest to his fellow hardcore Z-fans. Limited to a hectic three-day time frame, Garreau makes a valiant effort to hit as many *Dead* shrines as possible, including *Night of the Living Dead*'s Evans City cemetery, the legendary Latent Image office building at 247 Fort Pitt Boulevard in scenic downtown Pittsburgh, *Dawn of the Dead*'s rural airport and *Day of the Dead*'s Wampum Mine in Wampum, PA, where he encounters current workers who'd toiled as Romero zombies a quarter-century before. The doc's undisputed high point, though, unfolds at the Monroeville Mall, where *Dawn* alums Emge and Foree lead an enthusiastic legion of *Living Dead* devotees on a spirited tour of the formerly zombie-infested consumer citadel. Nothing if not thorough, Garreau also puts in stops at the 1990 *Night* remake farmhouse in Washington, PA, and the University of Pittsburgh, where scenes from Romero's Stephen King collaboration *Creepshow* were lensed. If you can overlook the video's sometimes lagging pace, you'll find *Fan of the Dead* the next best thing to being there, if only for an hour. ☞

—The Phantom

