

NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

by George Abagnalo

Frequently an artistic film containing nudity will play the nude theatre circuit. Cinema-sophisticates see it at an art house and understand and appreciate it, while voyeurs see it on 42nd Street and don't care what it's really about.

In October of 1968, the Walter Reade organization released a horror film entitled *Night of the Living Dead*. The film contains no nudity, but does contain gore, which made it eligible for 42nd Street.

The fact is, it should have been exposed as the work of art it really is through good distribution. Undoubtedly, the Walter Reade organization accepted it because it was of higher quality than most horror films, but they didn't bother to take care of it.

The title gives the impression that it is just another entry into the load of inept films now being circulated. That is just what it isn't. *Night of the Living Dead* may very well be the only horror film in the world that is actually horrible. As the illustrated history of the horror film, an encyclopedic survey, by Carlos Clarens maintains, most horror films should actually be called terror films. There is no planned comic-relief, no color, no lavish settings, no pretty dresses, in fact, nothing capable of taking your mind off of horror for one minute. True, it is a low-budget film, but that low budget was all that was needed.

There are so few flaws that lingering on them would be meaningless. The point of the film is to terrify, and it does because of the screenplay by John A. Russo, masterful camerawork and direction by George A. Romero, and performances, all by unknowns, that perfectly create conflict and suspense.

Radiation in the air activates the unburied dead and turns them into cannibals. They eat from each of their victims, and after a few minutes, the chewed-up victims stand up and join them. There are terrifying scenes of the mutilated ghouls roaming the countryside. Barbara (Judith O'Dea), a girl who witnessed her brother Johnnie (Russell Streiner) being killed, finds refuge in an old house. She is joined by Ben (Duane Jones), a negro who pulls up to the house in his truck. They discover the house's owner ripped to shreds at the top of the stairs, but luckily there are no monsters still in the house. Barbara loses her mind thinking about her brother, while Ben goes about boarding up the house. The real conflict and suspense begins when people burst into the room from the cellar door.

Harry (Karl Hardman), his wife Helen (Marilyn Eastman) and their wounded little girl Karen (Kyra Schon), together with a teenage couple, Tom (Keith Wayne) and Judy (Judith Ridley), took the cellar as their hiding place even before Barbara and Ben arrived. There is much arguing among them, especially when they should be working together against their enemies outside. Gradually they all die, and gradually the viewer becomes more and more terrified.

Tom and Judy blow up in Ben's truck during a plan of escape. Minutes later, the ghouls reach into the smoking truck and rip apart their cooked food. There are close-ups of them eating hearts, intestines, hands and other parts of Tom and Judy's anatomy.

In the house, Harry becomes resentful of Ben, realizing how much smarter Ben is than he. His wife seems to take Ben's side, which enrages him.

Little Karen sinks into a coma as she lays on a work bench in the cellar. Helen becomes worried as she watches the television reports, telling people to immediately burn anyone who dies.





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Suddenly, dozens of the ghouls try to break into the house. Harry goes berserk and Ben is forced to shoot him. Badly wounded, he stumbles down the cellar stairs, towards his daughter.

There is no time to worry about Harry, because the whole front of the house starts to fall in. Assorted hands grab Helen as she tries to push them out. Barbara in hysterics tries to help, but is dragged outside and eaten by her brother Johnnie. Helen gets loose and hurries to the cellar where she finds that her daughter has died. Little Karen is kneeling over her father's dead body, eating his arm. She drops the arm and approaches her mother. Helen falls in a state of disbelief, and dies screaming as her daughter stabs her never endingly with a trowel. The blood squirts all over the wall. Karen goes upstairs and tries to take a bite out of Ben, but is pushed aside as he runs to the cellar and boards himself in. Karen leads the parade of ghouls as they smash their way into the house and try to break down the cellar door in a frenzied state of starvation.

Downstairs, Harry, with one arm missing, opens his eyes and rises. Helen, unbelievably mutilated awakens too and Ben shoots them both in the skulls.

The next morning the front of the house is empty. Ben is safely nestled in the cellar. He comes upstairs when he hears dogs barking. Outside, a sheriff and his deputies are conducting an operation consisting of shooting the monsters in the head and burning them. One of the deputies notice Ben through a window, and, mistaking him for one of the ghouls, shoots him perfectly between the eyes. "Good shot. That's one more for the bonfire," says the sheriff.

Some people laugh when the film ends, but not because it is funny or badly done. They laugh because they can't believe what they have seen. Some leave silently, looking as though they're about to vomit.

When *Night of the Living Dead* opened, Ann Guarino of the Daily News gave it a one-star rating, but also said it was "Unbelievably horrible" and that anyone who sees it is "in for a ghostly picnic". She contradicted herself. A horrible horror film is a successful horror film. A successful film should receive a high rating.

Night of the Living Dead was re-released recently as a co-feature. It should open at an art house and run for at least a month, because it is a work of art.

DAMNED *Continued from page 11*

hand-polished red lacquered nails: the unhappy ending: "Martin kills Mother" the basic primitive story of THE DAMNED. Austrian Adolf Hitler kills Germany, his mother. That was his underlying secret of the German 12 years of historymaking tragedy.

In this film the great underlying profound verite of the 20th century revolutionary upheaval in Central Europe is only touched upon—the great film of this time, the counterpart of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as a movie, is not yet made. History is still too near. And even the great historic novel, the universal story of the Nazi time has not been written. But maybe THE DAMNED will inspire a new writer, to show it as it really was in all it's icy finality of death.

CACTUS *Continued from page 6*

of nuclear ash.

I resent "Cactus Flower." I resent any mass media-oriented product that deludedly misrepresents a society that so desperately needs clear and undefiled analysis. I resent a product, which for reasons of pure greed and exploitation, sells back to a willing public the treacle that is even now strangling it.