

Dawn of the Dead

Reviewed by Lisa Schwarzbaum

MOVIE GRADE
EW Grade: A



LEAVE NO ZOMBIE BEHIND Four out of five dentists agree killing zombies builds strong teeth, just ask Phifer

style, revels in the sophistication of modern special effects, and stomps off with the best remake -- er, "re-envisioning" -- of a horror classic in memory.

This "Dawn" breaks, scary, even before the opening credits. We're in and around Milwaukee now, not Romero's Pittsburgh, and in the swift exposition of "Tromeo & Juliet" screenwriter James Gunn's sharp script, the whole battle plan is drawn: how the infected dead rise up to feed; how one nurse (Sarah Polley), having watched her husband turn rabidly undead, escapes; and how she joins a gaggle of fellow survivors -- among them a cop (Ving Rhames), a salesman (Jake Weber), and a street tough (Mekhi Phifer) -- amid the useless luxuries of a mall biosphere. You know you've entered a 21st-century hell when zombies scratch at the doors while a piped-in Muzak version of "Don't Worry, Be Happy" continues to perk up nonexistent customers. (The musical choices are a demonic playlist pleasure.)

"Dawn of the Dead" is filled with tingles of humor -- at one point a couple of the guys, using the mall roof as a recreation deck, pick off zombies (who must, as you know, be shot in the head) based on their resemblance to celebrities, with Jay Leno and Burt Reynolds among the favored targets. But fronted by Polley and her lovely art-house gravity -- she's a perfect against-type heroine -- and modulated by Snyder's serious excitement, the movie never sloshes over into irony or snarky self-reference. As the visual style shifts from orangy 1970s saturation and simple edits to an anxious, parched blue blur of moves, the dread of "Dawn" deepens. Don't leave before the final frame -- if you're still breathing.

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