

DEAD MAN TALKING

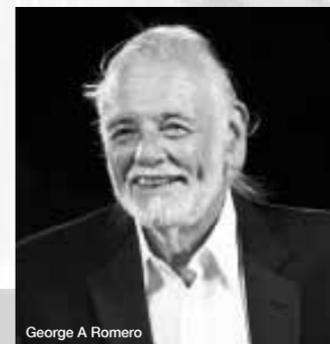
Jon Towlson talks to Larry Fessenden, executive producer of the documentary *Birth of the Living Dead*, which focuses on legendary director George A Romero

In 1968 a young George A Romero directed *Night of the Living Dead*, a low-budget horror film that revolutionised the horror genre, became an icon of 1960s counterculture, and spawned a zombie industry worth billions of dollars that continues to this day. Gathering together a team of ten investors (Image Ten), each kicking in 600 dollars apiece, Romero and his crew, which included co-writer John Russo, actors Duane Jones, Karl Hardman and Marilyn Eastman (who also provided sound effects from their radio station)

spent weekends in a deserted farmhouse outside of Pittsburgh shooting what would become arguably the most influential modern horror film ever made, while during the rest of the week they filmed beer commercials and adverts for washing powder for their advertising company, Latent Image.

The result became a manifesto for the modern horror film. In their 2004 retrospective of the horror film, the British Film Institute described *Night of the Living Dead* as 'a forerunner of the angry thrills of *Last House on the Left* and *The Texas Chain*

Saw Massacre' going on to claim that 'it takes its inspiration from the racial and political strife of late-60s America to create an anarchic verité nightmare, which overturned the conventions of fantastical horror.'



George A Romero

Now a new documentary, *Birth of the Living Dead*, shows how Romero gathered his unlikely team of Pittsburghers - policemen, iron workers, teachers, ad men, housewives and a roller-rink owner - to shoot, in guerrilla run-and-gun style, his chilling black and white masterpiece. During that process Romero and his team created a new and frightening monster - one that was undead and feasted upon human flesh. What made the flesh-eating zombie such a potent monster was

the realisation, as Romero has remarked, that the living dead are simply 'us'. 'This is what we have turned into, what we have done to ourselves.'

In the late 1960s cultural rebellion by the younger generation brought the hippie lifestyle into the public consciousness. At the same time mass demonstrations against the war in Vietnam and race riots in major cities were tearing America apart. *Birth of the Living*

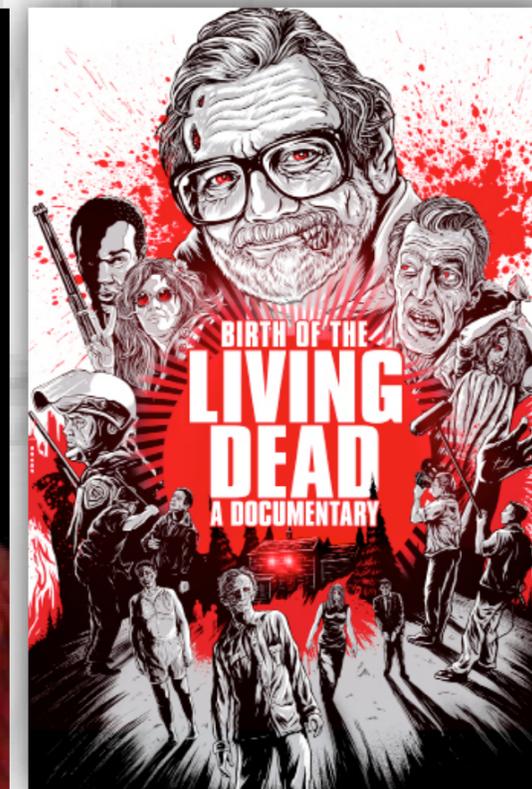
Dead immerses audiences in the time in which *Night* was shot. Archival footage of the horrors of Vietnam and racial violence at home, combined with iconic music from the 60s, invites viewers to experience how Romero's tumultuous film reflected this period in American history. *Birth of the Living Dead* shows how Romero created a world-renowned horror film that was also a profound insight into a society falling apart at the seams.

Birth of the Living Dead comes alive

Birth of the Living Dead was shot in New York City, Toronto and Los Angeles between the end of 2006 and the Summer of 2011. It was directed by Rob Kuhns, who has been editing documentaries in New York since 1987. It was produced by Kuhns and his wife, Esther. Kuhns had been a fan of Romero's work since the early 1980s when he first saw *Night of the Living Dead* as a midnight movie. *Night*



Larry Fessenden is a huge Romero fan





had been playing regularly in New York since it first came out in '68. Kuhns read about Romero and became fascinated with the story of the making of Night. "Here was this crew of mostly working class people, not very experienced in filmmaking and with very few resources, coming together to make a seminal and world-shaking film. It was a great story of a little-movie-that-could."

After filming extensive interviews with George A Romero in Toronto, Kuhns started editing what would become Birth of the Dead. But the project really began to take shape when Kuhns started to explore the television archive footage of the Vietnam era. He saw the news stories of racial violence exploding across the country and horrific combat footage of the Vietnam War - and the US government responses to both - and realised that Romero and his collaborators had created in Night of the Living Dead a film about the world coming to an end at a historic time of enormous upheaval - a living document of the time in which it was made. Once Kuhns illuminated the historical context, his new documentary evolved into something much richer than the 'making of' film that he originally envisaged.

Big influence

Enter Larry Fessenden, a filmmaker who has been compared to Romero for the



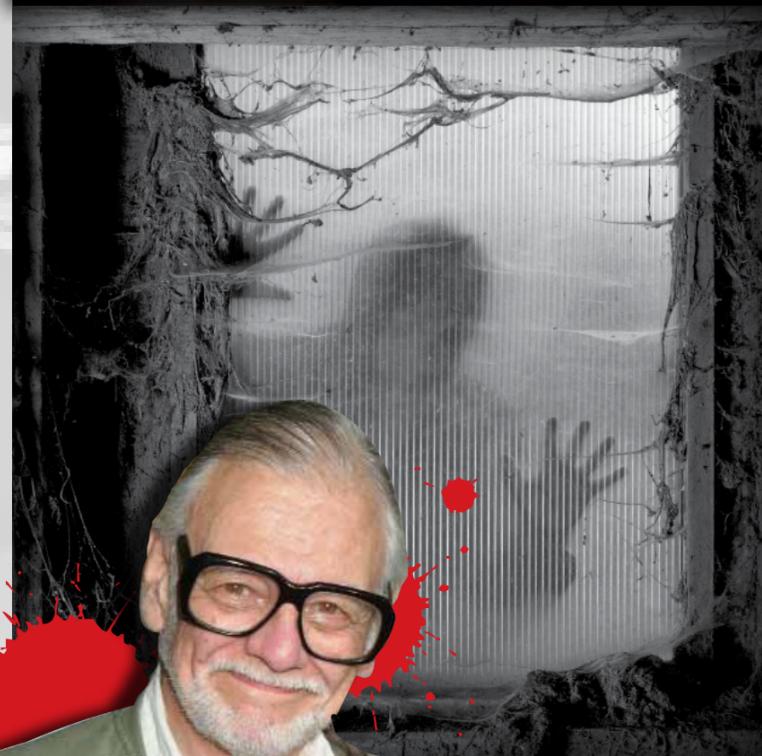
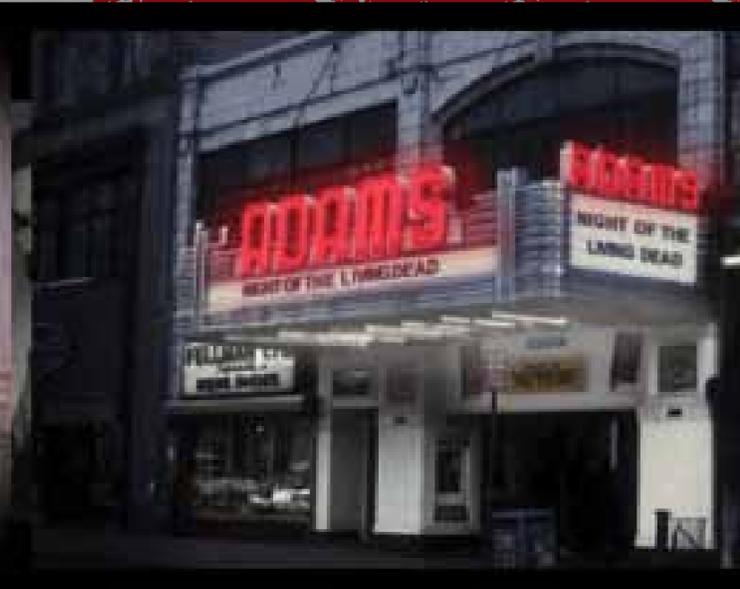
social statement horror films that he has made. As well as directing groundbreaking horrors like Habit (1995), Wendigo (2001), The Last Winter (2006) and Beneath (2013), Fessenden and his production company, Glasseye Pix, has also produced films for the likes of Ti West (The Innkeepers) and Jim Mickle (Stake Land), as well as acting in a whole host of movies for Brad Anderson (Session 9), Jeremy Gardner (The Battery), Mickle, West and others. Alongside lending his services



as an onscreen interviewee to Birth of the Living Dead, Fessenden also came on board as executive producer, offering suggestions to Kuhns for further interviews that would help in the direction the film was going, helping with the sound mix and generally providing Kuhns with assistance in getting the film finished. Larry



Audiences flocked to see Night of the Living Dead



Fessenden has probably done more to further the cause of independent horror cinema than anyone else in the past ten years, and his own subversive sense of the genre makes him the perfect spokesman for the documentary and its commentary on Romero's legacy:

So then, how did Night of the Living Dead create a template for the political horror films that followed? Larry Fessenden: "I

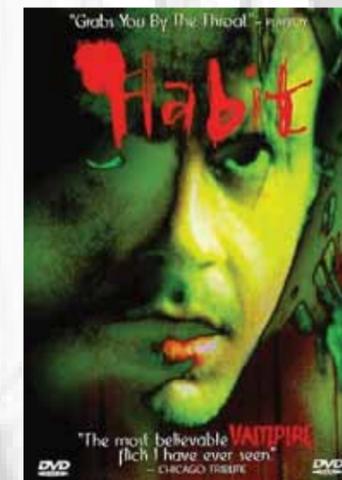
"I've always felt that horror was a very personal genre and that it was an essential way to express personal anxieties" - Larry Fessenden

think what's remarkable about the film is that you can sense the cultural upheaval of America in the late 60s in the DNA of the project. There's just a questioning of authority. There's a sense of despair, I think, in the movie, especially with the ending, that anticipates movies that were more directly addressing the upheaval of the '60s. That's why

Night of the Living Dead had, and similar films like Last House on the Left, and some other movies that came up in that time. But I don't think Romero was being political on purpose, I think it was just a sign of the times that this young band of filmmakers outside of the Hollywood system got together and just their way of thinking coincided with the cultural upheaval of the time."

Habit (1995), your psychological horror vampire movie, reminds me a bit of Romero's Martin (1977). Have you taken any conscious influence from Romero's work, or from 1970s horror in general?

"I've always felt that horror was a very personal genre and that it was an essential way to express personal anxieties, and Habit was such a film. It came out of my love of the realism of '70s movies, combined with my affection for horror tropes that I observed when I was a kid watching the old Universal movies on television, like Dracula and Frankenstein from the '30s. So my own films were my effort to combine the gritty social realism of the '70s movies with these horror tropes. I feel that Romero was doing the same thing. I wasn't necessarily influenced by him so



I think it's such a remarkable film. Horror movies at that time had become almost kids' entertainment with the old Vincent Price and Roger Corman films, haunted castles and stuff, and they didn't have the grit that



to participate because they're not sure how it fits in. One of the worst things that happened to horror was Halloween (1978), which was so successful that finally Hollywood realised that rather than being a subversive bastard genre, horror can be a money maker. As a result, we have this landscape of remakes and repetition in the horror genre coming out of the studio system. But, at its best, horror comes as a reaction to the culture, as a way to shake up people's complacency, and to get them to rethink the choices that we're making in society. It really should be the punk rock of cinema. It should be rattling cages. That's one of the pleasures. Because we're dealing with something that most people don't want to think about: which is death, and death in the larger sense of the self-destructive hubris of



"I feel very strongly that the horror genre should respond to the horrors of the day, and we have them in spades now"

era, the assassinations we were having in the States at the time, and a real sense of anxiety and despair over what our future was. I think the best horror films rattle you and make you walk away feeling unsettled, I mean - that's the agenda. Just to make horror as an entertainment is to betray the genre itself somehow."

much as comforted that there was someone else out there with the same agenda. I loved Martin when it came out. I really like The Crazies, which is an early Romero film, and all of the first three Living Dead movies. They were all very engaged with the issues of the day. They were social criticism. Obviously Dawn of the Dead is

a critique of consumer culture. So in those days Horror was an alternative, outsider genre, and it was critiquing the culture at the same time as it was shocking and horrifying. I feel very strongly that the horror genre should respond to the horrors of the day, and we have them in spades now. I made a film called The Last Winter,

which is about climate change. It's also still a horror yarn. I just prefer to serve up my social criticism with the pleasures of genre."

Learning lessons

Night of the Living Dead was one of the most successful independent films ever made. What lessons might an independent

filmmaker learn from it? "I think it's an essential model. It's one of the first true models of independent production. You have a bunch of guys who had cameras, that had experience working in advertising, they knew their way around the technology of film and they just decided to pool their money with a bunch of local business partners - bowling alley owners and butchers and the local people in Pittsburgh - and they made the movie entirely outside of the system, and I think it's inspiring to this day. Because as an independent producer, I spend so much time chasing money, trying to convince people that my projects are interesting and unique, and it's precisely because they're unique that the money folks don't want

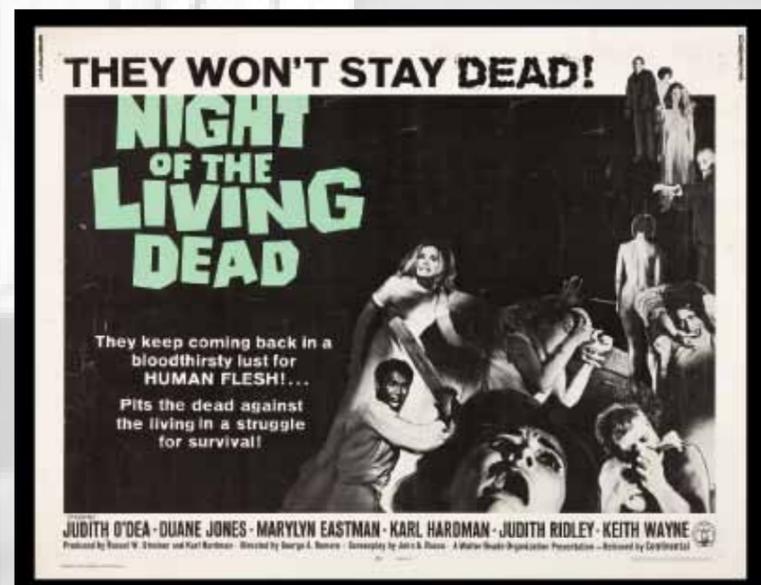


society. For romance you go to your comedies, which is fine. For drama, you do drama. But with horror you're trying to get at something dark about the human experience, and I find that by definition you're going to be confrontational there. So horror is subversive. And if it isn't, it's because it's being turned into a spectacle, and that's where gore no longer shocks you, but is, in fact, an entertainment with a lot

of effects. So that's a problem. There's a hundred exceptions. It's possible that that new Godzilla movie will be reminding us of our choices and that it'll show a society in collapse. I only hope that horror retains its vigour. One of the reasons that Night of the Living Dead is so effective is that it does not wrap up and give a comforting conclusion. It is open-ended and despairing, and I think that speaks to the Vietnam

Film mentor

What motivates you to play a godfather role to other filmmakers? In some ways you are like Coppola in the 1970s creating American Zoetrope to bring other filmmakers under his wing who were likeminded as an alternative



BIRTH OF THE LIVING DEAD

REVIEW BY
JON TOWLSON



Including exclusive new interviews with George A Romero himself and providing a visual comparison with news footage of the turbulent '60s, Birth of the Living Dead shows just how politically charged the original zombie-meister's seminal first film really was. Combining interviews with Romero, Larry Fessenden, author Mark Harris and film critic Elvis Mitchell with archival footage showing the backdrop of race riots and Vietnam, director Rob Kuhns has created a visceral and exciting documentary about a landmark film that is just exciting as the film itself. While his overall approach is perhaps not new - Night had been given similar treatment in the documentary The American Nightmare (which contextualised the whole 1970s apocalyptic horror film cycle in a similar way) - at 76 highly entertaining minutes, Birth is arguably the most in-depth account of Romero's undead

classic yet made.

Romero is cordial and engaging as he describes the fraught production, revealing that he was surprised the film ever got finished, given the cash flow problems. Starting out with a measly \$6,000 seed money kicked in by the film's ten principle investors, Romero and his company bought a 35mm camera with the proceeds of a relatively well paid advertising spot for Calgon detergent, hired a desolate farm house near Evans City, PA, and rounded up whatever cast and crew they could muster from local talent.

They enlisted friends and family as the zombie extras, including advertising executive clients of Romero; one of the investors, famously, owned a meat-packing business and provided the entrails for the zombie gut-munching scenes, which the extras tucked into with relish, much to

Romero's delight. Local police were persuaded to appear in the film with their dogs as part of the zombie-hunting posse; a helicopter news reporter from the local TV station agreed to lend his chopper for aerial shots. The film was given free publicity by a TV horror movie host for another local station, who also wound up appearing in the film as a news anchorman. Romero tells these stories with gusto; he also reveals in relation to the grainy news footage look of the film, that shooting in black and white was mainly a budgetary decision.

Romero also reveals the trials and tribulations of selling his independent movie. Literally packing the answer print into the boot of the car, he and producer Russ Streiner set off to New York to try to sell their movie to a distributor, eventually netting a deal with the Walter Read Organisation, a foreign film distributor looking to

move into the exploitation market. Night of the Living Dead became their most successful film, but Romero and his investors saw very little of the profits. And, to make matters worse, lost copyright of the film when international distributors, exploiting a mistake by Reade, assumed the film was in the public domain and simply started striking their own prints without obtaining licenses. The film ended up making millions, but little of it was accounted for. Such stories, recounted with humour by Romero, nevertheless serve as a cautionary tale to independent filmmakers everywhere.

As well as its financial success, Night has become a cultural icon, and while the interviewees in Birth of the Living Dead may lack the academic clout of Carol J Clover or Adam Lowenstein (who appeared in The American Nightmare) Fessenden, Harris and Mitchell all provide great insight into the significance of the film: its relation to the racial tensions of the time and to the strife caused by mass opposition to the Vietnam war.

Particularly revealing is the comparison given between Night and Hollywood movies of the time, which purported to comment on racial relations between black and white, such as In the Heat of the Night and The Defiant Ones, with Night shown to be far more radical than Sidney Poitier's liberalist movies of the 1960s. Birth also comments on the way that Night has become part of popular culture, with Gale Anne Hurd talking about Night's undeniable influence on The Walking Dead. Bizarrely, we even see a New York teacher using the film as a way to embed literacy in the classroom, teaching ten-year-olds how to spell words such as 'rigor mortis'.

Ending with a touching tribute to Romero's first ever zombie, Bill Hinzman, who, as well as carrying out lighting duties on the production, also played the graveyard zombie at the start of the film, Birth provides a fascinating insight into the making of and historical significance of what is arguably one of the most important independent films ever made. Highly recommended. ■

to the Studios. You've achieved something of the same in working with all of these other filmmakers as an actor and a producer. What makes you want to do that?

"I am very passionate about the sense of community, a community of artists that can stand up against the corporate interests of capitalism and the capitalist society. The idea is to band together and to take a stand and keep the art vital; and I just enjoy different artistic points of view and somehow just pursuing my own project isn't quite satisfying.



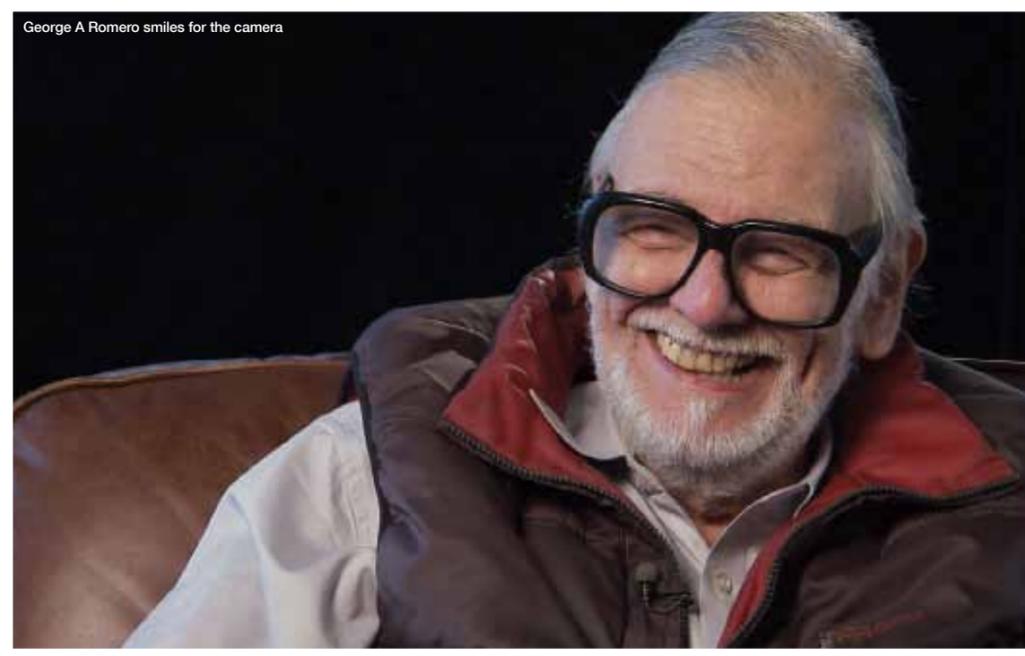
But to be in a sort of curatorial position, to be able to celebrate different aspects of cinema - and outside of the genre as well - I find that very stimulating. I'm definitely influenced by the Coppola - Lucas - Scorsese - Spielberg connection and the fact that those guys were all friends and did support each other. Coppola made American Graffiti and they all saw Star Wars when it first came out and some of them laughed at Lucas. I mean, those are the most exciting trends to look at in the arts, to sort of

see how bands of artists stuck together and supported each other and brought about new movements. I think that my films flow very naturally into Ti West's approach to horror, and now Jim Mickle, and there's a lot of unsung heroes in our group like Graham Reznick (sound designer on Stake Land, House of the Devil, The Innkeepers), who are essential in keeping this going. I think you have movements in film and it's fun to be part of that."

Do you see a similar kinship

in this modern-day movement to the group of filmmakers like Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven, John Carpenter, David Cronenberg and Jeff Lieberman, who together with Romero revolutionised Horror in the 70s?

"I see a kinship. Ultimately, I can't speak about the overall impact we'll have. I'll leave that to the historians. But I see likemindedness, a seriousness to the genre. It's not just my circle of people. We're just doing it out of New York, and our movement might have come and gone, but there's a lot of interesting movies being made now that takes the genre more seriously. And independent cinema in general, where you're really celebrating the power of the individual voice and you're not pursuing this monoculture that you see coming out of Hollywood. It's a desperate situation. They don't even make films for adults any more in America. We have the superhero tropes, and the franchises and it's really a desolate place. The only hope is that some of the smaller films that confront the viewer can fill some of the void."



George A Romero smiles for the camera