



IN DREAMS ARE MONSTERS

Pontypool

As a conceit for a penny-pinching horror movie, it's hard to fault. Restrict the action to the basement studio of a local radio station in deepest Ontario and feel the tension rise as reports come in of inexplicable incidents, marauding residents and blood on the streets. Are the broadcasters and their listeners the victims of some elaborate stunt, or could this really be happening? Initially, at least, there's no corroboration on the wire services, but when the BBC starts asking about an apparent 'insurgency' gripping the area, it's clear that this is no ordinary day of weather reports and eye-in-the-sky travel updates for Stephen McHattie's gravel-voiced shock jock Grant Mazzy.

Adapted from Tony Burgess' novel *Pontypool Changes Everything*, Canadian indie stalwart Bruce McDonald's latest has another trick in store, which raises it from the familiarity of mere zombie siege suspenser to something else, since the claustrophobic unease also provokes the notion of a viral infection of the global media babblesphere, suggesting that the unstoppable flow of information overload isn't just perverting language but potentially rotting our brains. So it's one for fans of George Romero and William Burroughs (whose writings, of course, put forward the notion of language as a viral entity), as the film's exposition fills in how the mother tongue is passing on the flesh-craving contagion, and it thus dawns on Mazzy that every word to pass his lips is escalating the outbreak. In between, there's a moment to have literary theory students levitating with excitement as Mazzy makes a heroic attempt to save the day with a monologue ('Kill is kiss... kiss is kill!' etc) setting out to defamiliarise language by detaching listening from understanding. In other hands, this might come across as insufferably pretentious, but it's a tribute to McHattie's spot-on contribution that it sings with a kind of desperate rebel defiance in the face of the inevitable, absurd yet also strangely captivating. It's a welcome showcase too for an actor whose evident talents have arguably never quite achieved the career profile they deserve.

It's refreshing to see a filmmaker keeping faith with the idea of the low-budget horror arena as a breeding ground for radical ideas. And, of course, the particular nuance that it's only English that's affected, not French, must certainly have prompted some rueful chuckles from the Québécois.

Trevor Johnston, *Sight and Sound*, November 2009

There are, frankly, only so many zombie films that world needs and the prospect of another rarely elicits much enthusiasm these days. But there are occasional gems to be found in the now well-worn walking dead sub-genre and Bruce McDonald's remarkable Canadian low budgeter *Pontypool* finds something fresh and innovative to do with a fetid sub-genre that was all but played out by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Based on the novel *Pontypool Changes Everything* by Tony Burgess (who also penned this adaptation) it sidesteps the clichés of the zombie movie by virtually ignoring the George A. Romero model in favour of something far more interesting.

Set almost entirely in a single room, *Pontypool* charts a zombie holocaust with a difference as radio DJ Grant Mazzy (Stephen McHattie) and his team, Sydney Briar (Lisa Houle) and Laurel Ann (Georgina Reilly), gradually piece

together the jigsaw of clues painting a disturbing vision of the world beyond their basement studio falling apart. As the local population go on a killing spree it slowly dawns on them that a virus is being spread through the English language, key words (particularly terms of endearment) triggering a murderous psychosis in those who can understand them.

Set in the suburbs of Ontario, where French is spoken alongside English, *Pontypool* is a uniquely Canadian film. When it becomes clear that somehow the plague is being spread by a comprehension of English words (the film is purposefully vague about the mechanics of the infection) Mazzy and Briar (Laurel Ann has already succumbed and joined the ranks of the 'conversationalists') try to limit communication to French, though Mazzy in particular isn't much of a linguist. A cure of sorts is effected when the couple discover that repeating English trigger words repeatedly until they obliterate any sense of meaning ('Kiss is kill').

Freed of the need to deliver the now *de rigueur* gore, *Pontypool* ploughs its own intellectual furrow, channelling David Cronenberg more than Romero. It questions the effectiveness of the authorities to deal with a situation this bizarre (a warning broadcast in French ends with the useless and ill-placed advice not to translate the message), the role of the media in times of catastrophe (Mazzy tries to do his best to keep the locals informed but is thrown off-balance by an idiot BBC reporter who phones in looking for an interview, determined that the mayhem is being caused by Québécois separatists) and the fallibility of human communication. All heady stuff that gives *Pontypool* a distinct edge against the hordes of identikit direct-to-DVD zombie effluence released each year.

McDonald mostly keeps the visceral stuff off screen (though an increasingly bloody Laurel Ann's relentless attempts to get at her colleagues by throwing herself against the plexiglass soundproofing has a nasty payoff), preferring to engage the imagination and intellect rather than the gut. The real horror in *Pontypool* comes from the knowledge that the uninfected will eventually, by necessity, have to either live completely isolated lives, never speaking to anyone in their native tongue again, nor ever watching native-language films or TV or listening to the radio, or find a completely new language to communicate with, or succumb to the infection. And if English is susceptible to this kind of contamination, how safe is any other tongue going to be?

Performances are first rate throughout, though the show is comprehensively stolen by McHattie, rarely given this much to do and making a grand job of a past his prime cynic given a late-in-life chance to shine in extraordinary circumstances. He's well matched by Houle (McHattie's real-life wife) and Reilly, the three of them carrying much of the film with only minimal support from the obligatory doctor who knows too much (Hrant Alianak), a few shambling 'conversationalists' (the word zombie is never used), voices heard in phone-ins or live reports or a visiting theatre group who are plugging their musical version of *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Wildly imaginative, *Pontypool* is quite unlike not only any other zombie film but pretty much any other horror movie. Its dizzying mix of linguistic theory, apocalyptic horror and small-scale drama is exhilarating and renews one faith in a horror seam that had looked well and truly mined to exhaustion.

Kevin Lyons, The EOFTV Review, eofftvreview.wordpress.com

PONTYPOOL

Director: Bruce McDonald
©: Ponty Up Pictures Inc.
Production Company: Shadow Shows
Presented by: Maple Pictures
Presented in association with: Crescent Road Films
Executive Producers: Henry Cole, J. Miles Dale, Jasper Graham, Isabella Smejda
Producers: Jeffrey Coghlan, Ambrose Roche
Line Producer: John Nadalin
Associate Producers: Michale Raske, Billie Mintz
Shadow Shows Executive: Dany Chiasson
Production Co-ordinator: Howard Ng
Location Manager: Greg Holmgren
Post-production Supervisor: Marc Bachli
1st Assistant Director: John Pace
Script Supervisor: Matti Huhta
Writer: Tony Burgess
Director of Photography: Miroslaw Baszak
Camera Operator: Miroslaw Baszak
B Camera Operator: Vinit Borrison
Red Cam D.I.T. Technician: Erik Greensmith
1st Assistant Camera: John Hickey
1st Assistant B Camera: Mike Dawson
2nd Assistant Camera: Beth Nobes, Nicole Torok
2nd Assistant B Camera: Angela Chao
3rd Assistant Camera: Matthew Bedard
Chief Lighting Technician: Mike McDonald
Key Grip: David Ferguson
Still Photographers: Caitlin Cronenberg, Ioana Vasile
Visual Effects by: Toronto Mr. X Inc.
Visual Effects Supervisor: Aaron Weintraub
Visual Effects Executive Producer: Dennis Berardi
Visual Effects Production Manager: Isabelle Langlois
Visual Effects Co-ordinators: Melanie Martin, Sarah Barber
Special Effects Co-ordinator: Geoff Hill
Editor: Jeremiah Munce
Assistant Editor: Duff Smith
Production Designer: Lea Carlson
Art Director: Andrew Berry
Set Decorator: Andrij Molodecky
Set Dresser: Lyle Jobe
B&W Portraits: John Price

Property Masters: Kenny Meinzingler, Adrienne Trent
Construction Co-ordinator: Marc Kутtenbrouwer
Costume Designer: Sarah Armstrong
Key Make-up/Hair: Indiana Allemang
Prosthetics by: Matthew Dewilde
Title Design: J.L. Munce
Colour/Digital Intermediate by: DeLuxe
Camera/Equipment Provided by: PS - Production Services, Magnet Film and Digital
Original Music by: Claude Foisy
Music Supervisor: Jody Colero
Music Consultant: Michael Perlmutter
Sound Designer: Steve Munro
Sound Recordist: Michael Lacroix
Boom Operator: Daryl Purdy
Re-recording Mixers: John Hazen, Jan Rudy
Supervising Sound Editor: Steve Munro
Dialogue Editor: David Drainie Taylor
Sound Effects Editor: Paul Shikata
Foley Artist: John Sievert
EPK: Gordon Culley, JR Powell, Andrew K. Martin
Unit Publicist: Sasha Stoltz

Cast

Stephen McHattie (*Grant Mazzy*)
Lisa Houle (*Sydney Briar*)
Georgina Reilly (*Laurel-Ann Drummond*)
Hrant Alianak (*Dr Mendez*)
Rick Roberts (*Ken Loney*)
Daniel Fathers (*Nigel Healing*)
Beatriz Yuste (*Nancy Freethy*)
Tony Burgess (*Tony, 'Lawrence'*)
Boyd Banks (*Jay, 'Osama'*)
Hannah Fleming (*Maureen, 'Farraj'*)
Rachel Burns (*Colleen, 'Daud'*)
Laura Nordin (*spooky woman*)
Louis Negin, Diane Gordon, Daniele Park, Yvonne Moore,
Raffaele Carniato (*conversationalists*)

Canada 2008©

93 mins

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