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Cinema File: 'Brain Dead' is classic horror

By Andrew Shearer | Commentary | Story updated at 8:35 pm on 3/26/2009

If you wanted to argue that the modern horror picture was born in the South, you'd have a pretty solid case. In the '60s and '70s, long before the era of the 24-screen multiplex, films like Herschell Gordon Lewis's "Blood Feast" and the original "Texas Chain Saw Massacre" were made specifically to be shown at drive-in theaters all across states like Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Kentucky to audiences looking for cheap, safe thrills and chills on a hot and humid Friday night.

The impressive box office receipts garnered such a huge return on investment for the producers, it's no wonder Hollywood quickly took notice and began churning out its own mega-budget versions of these kinds of movies. Hit films such as "Jaws" and "The Exorcist," now regarded as classics, essentially were just "A movies" with "B movie" plots. As time went on, drive-ins slowly died out, smaller theaters were bought out by huge chain companies, and the major studios got nice and cozy with national distributors.

Since the 1990s, smaller budget, independently produced fright flicks have been relegated to home-video rental shelves and the 2:30 a.m. slot of the Cinemax programming schedule, but still manage to reach legions of appreciative fans worldwide, despite being completely absent from local cinemas.

In an effort to restore the balance and bring back the spirit of the drive-in, Monogram Releasing has rolled out a series of new films in 12 select cities across the country.

Nova Cinemas in Commerce, just 22 miles north of Athens, is one of the theaters (the only one in

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Brain Dead

4 out of 5 stars
Director: Kevin Tenney
Stars: Joshua Benton, Sarah Grant Brendecke, David Crane, and Andy Forrest.
Length: 95 min.
Rating: Unrated

the state) participating in Monogram's "B Movie Nation" program, and began showing the first one this past Friday.

"Brain Dead," directed by Kevin Tenney, is nothing short of a revelation. Jam-packed with aliens, zombies, exploding heads, bad jokes, skinny-dipping campers and escaped psychos with shotguns, it's a return to the ridiculously fun style of moviemaking that's been gone from the big screen for too long.

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Tenney, best known for creating "Night Of The Demons" - the last, truly great horror film of the '80s - made sure to pull out all the stops with "Brain Dead." It's as if he threw everything but the kitchen sink into the project because he wasn't sure if he'd ever get the chance to make another movie, and delivered one of the most satisfying and unique low-budget fright flicks I've seen in years.

It deserves to be shown in theaters, audiences deserve to have a true alternative offered at the multiplex, and Tenney deserves to be back where he belongs: cranking out grade-A schlock for people like me who appreciate it.

With such upcoming titles as "Stomp! Shout! Scream!" (from Adult Swim producer Jay Edwards), "Mil Mascaras vs. The Aztec Mummy" and Troma's "Poultrygeist" (a gross-out masterpiece that must be seen to be believed), a few road trips out to Commerce might be in order for horror fans in Georgia seeking a modern, air-conditioned, stadium-seating return to the era of the drive-in movie.

• *Shearer is a local filmmaker who lives in Athens and likes pineapple soda. He can be reached at andrew.shearer@onlineathens.com.*

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