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RAIMI: HE'LL SWALLOW YOUR SOUL

BY: TIMOTHY PATRICK

Give a nineteen-year-old and his friends \$90,000 and what will happen? They'll make **THE EVIL DEAD** (1982). That's what Sam Raimi did a little over ten years ago. He grew up in the Midwest with friends such as Bruce Campbell, making short movies whenever they got the chance. They often showed these at high school for the limited exposure and to show off their work. From this beginning, few would guess how successful Raimi would turn out to be.

At the age of nineteen, Raimi and friends dropped out of school and tried to scrape up enough money to make **THE EVIL DEAD**. With a promotional short titled **WITHIN THE WOODS**, the group traveled around trying to get money from anyone who would watch their short. Without any luck interesting merchants, Raimi turned to dentists and other businessmen and finally raised the money to start filming.

It was difficult for a first-time director to make everything work and he was extremely limited by his budget, but Raimi ended up with a cult classic. Upon completion of filming, Raimi visited every distributor he could find, looking for support, but none of them were interested in the movie. This left him no choice but to go overseas where the film became a hit in Britain and finally made its way back here. When it came back to the US, **THE EVIL DEAD** developed a loyal following and Raimi was considered a hot, new talent.

The mixture of comedy and horror was new to many viewers who were used to the pathetic slasher epics of the late seventies. With an underground feel and melodramatic humor, **THE EVIL DEAD** was original and embraced by the horror public. In fact, the movie was

acclaimed by Stephen King and film critics, all except for one scene. The infamous tree-rape scene was considered offensive by many and almost got the movie banned. Disgustingly, Raimi claimed to be sorry for the scene, saying it was too graphic. If he had to make the movie over, the scene would not be there.

This is really too bad. I hated to think that **THE EVIL DEAD** was the only movie Raimi would make that pushed the edge. But he did express regret at including the scene, something that boggles my mind. When making a film about evil creatures from another time, there is no reason to make them nice, and certainly no reason to criticize a shocking scene merely because it made a few people squeamish.

Raimi did just that, and perhaps this endeared him further to the big studios. Now he was not only a hot, young prospect, but also someone who could be convinced of what was best by the studio execs. Unfortunately, this quality resulted in Empire picture's **CRIMEWAVES (THE XYZ MURDERS, 1985)**. This film, which Raimi doesn't even like, is truly pathetic. The story is uninteresting and hard to follow because the film mixes so many elements. Slapstick, horror, action, romance--



'Give me some pussy, baby!'

they're all present in this jumbled mess. There are parts where each aspect succeeds, but the mixture cannot sustain itself through an entire movie.

Raimi claims **CRIMEWAVES** was destroyed by Empire pictures. They replaced his actors, musician, and edited the script at their whim. (I can't believe that Raimi would give up the opportunity to kill Louise Lasser.) This is probably true, but as a young director with nothing more than an independent film under his belt, Raimi could expect nothing more. Perhaps his desperation at getting funding for **THE EVIL DEAD** and then distributing it lead him into a bad situation, one where he could be taken advantage of and his film could be molded by the studio. It was a tough thing for Raimi to handle, but in retrospect he realizes the film could never have been good because it tried to do too many things and ended up doing nothing more than disappointing.

After this disappointment, Raimi felt the need to get back on top. The best, and easiest, way for him to do this was by making the sequel to **THE EVIL DEAD**. He collaborated with old friend Scott Spiegel on the script and wrapped production in 1987. **EVIL DEAD II: DEAD BY DAWN** showed that Raimi could succeed when mixing film elements (horror and comedy) provided the scope was limited enough. This film differs from the first and **CRIMEWAVES** in its focus. While **THE EVIL DEAD** had comedy elements, it leaned to the horror side of film, and **CRIMEWAVES** didn't focus on anything. But **EVIL DEAD II** was clearly a slapstick horror, molding both features to fit the story.

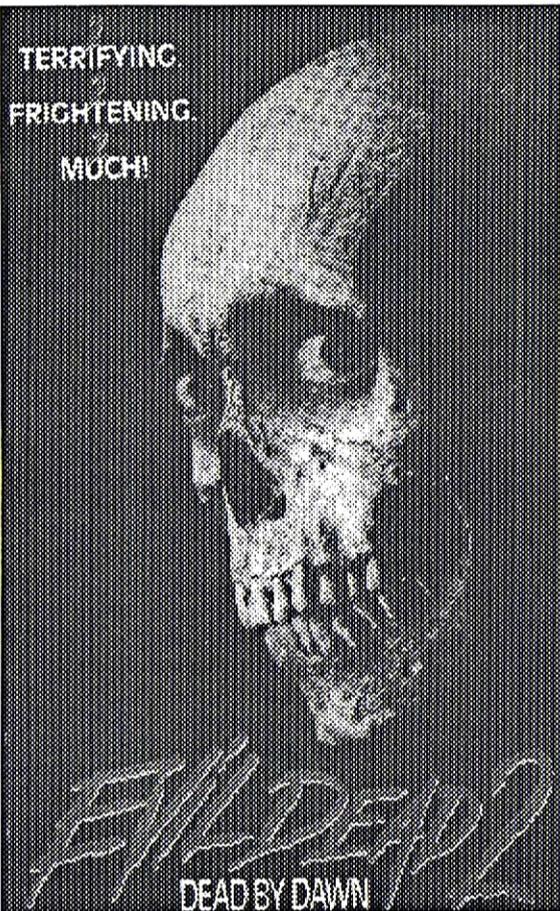
Ash returned as the inept hero, trying to get out of the deserted cabin with little more than his "wits" and a shotgun. While the basic plot is similar to **THE EVIL DEAD**, Raimi now had \$4 million of Dino DeLaurentis' money to work with. He used this to improve the cast and effects. Instead of using no-names from local

theater groups and homemade effects, Raimi hired all professional for **EVIL DEAD II**. The difference clearly shows in the scenes featuring monster effects where you can actually see what's happening. Raimi no longer had to rely on clever camerawork to hide the cost of his effects.

The audience noticed the difference too, flocking to the unrated movie that boasted both extreme gore and slapstick comedy. **EVIL DEAD II** was a respectable hit both in the US and overseas. Once again, Raimi was hot and the big studios beckoned.

With the success of **EVIL DEAD II**, Raimi was finally able to make a big studio release that wasn't destined to flop. **DARKMAN** (1989), a revenge fantasy, featured Liam Neeson as the avenger and was clearly a Raimi feature. There were some of his slapstick lines, but his influence was most clearly scene in the camerawork. Audiences were amazed by the point-of-view action that Raimi has always used. This interest made **DARKMAN**, with its \$9 million budget, the number one movie the week it came out. The film didn't stay at the top very long because of poor advertising--it was not billed as a Sam Raimi film. While the crowds liked the camerawork, it wasn't the mindless action flick the ads promised. Despite this, the film did turn a profit and solidified Raimi's position as a player with the major studios.

And, as expected, Raimi used this influence to return for the third installment in the **EVIL DEAD** series, **ARMY OF DARKNESS** (1993). Set in the medieval times Ash found himself stranded in at the end of **EVIL DEAD II**, this picture suffered similar studio interference as **CRIMEWAVES**, but it was certainly a better effort. Since the character of Ash is firmly established and Raimi is more savvy at dealing with the studios, their intrusion didn't destroy the movie. They certainly tried, attempting to release **ARMY** as a PG-13 fuckfest, but Raimi



held firm and the film was released as an R-rated feature.

The cuts that ended up chopping *ARMY OF DARKNESS* did change the story slightly, but they didn't completely change the movie. The studio insisted that the scene involving the midget-Ashes be cut significantly because they thought it was too silly. They also changed the ending so Ash ended up back in his own time, working at S-Mart. Some of the evil dead followed him and he fought one. In the original, Ash oversleeps and ends up stuck in a post-apocalyptic future. All in all, these cuts are more annoying than distressing. It would be nice if they let Raimi make *his* movie, but at

least the studio didn't rape it like they have so many others.

Censorship aside, *ARMY* is interesting to look at. Centering on a battle between the ancient civilization and the evil dead, the movie details Ash's struggles to find the *Necronomicon* (by the mad Arab Alhazred) so he can destroy the evil dead and find his way back to our time. This story left ample opportunity for inventive horror, but Raimi relied more on comedy, and I think it shows clearly that Raimi will never again make anything remotely like *THE EVIL DEAD*. That film turned him into a horror hit, but he hasn't followed up on that at all. Each successive film has leaned more to slapstick, which isn't surprising considering Raimi calls *The Three Stooges* a big influence on him. But this does mean something for horror fans: *ARMY* was predominately a slapstick film, with elements of horror. Raimi's future movies will probably be similar.

This isn't to say that *ARMY* is worthless, but it's different from *THE EVIL DEAD* and even *DEAD BY DAWN*. Raimi has steadily moved from true horror to horror-comedy (and now to comedy-horror). I think his movies, including *ARMY*, succeed at what they attempt, but horror fans may be disappointed at what Raimi offers in the future. I believe he will move steadily into the mainstream and leave the horror genre behind. This may be what he wanted to do all along because he loves Steven Spielberg (I think I'm going to be sick) and saw horror films as the easiest way to get into filmmaking.

So don't be surprised if Raimi's next feature is a box office smash and offers little to the fans of *THE EVIL DEAD*. There is a chance he won't do it, but with mega-success around the corner, it's hard to believe that Raimi would go back to the underground world of the horror genre and leave the bright lights and big money of Hollywood behind.