

USA, 1987. 85 min. De Laurentiis Entertainment Group/ Renaissance Pictures. Cast: Bruce Campbell, Sarah Berry, Dan Hicks, Kassie DePaiva, Ted Raimi, Denise Bixler; Music: Joseph LoDuca; Cinematography: Peter Deming; Edited by: Kaye Davis; Produced by: Robert Tapert & Bruce Campbell; Written by: Sam Raimi & Scott Spiegel; Directed by: Sam Raimi

**T**he *Evil Dead* was a film that beat the odds. It was helmed by a nineteen year-old working on his first feature, starred a bunch of unknown and largely untested kids, and financed mainly by Michigan dentists who believed in the young director and his friends when they pitched their movie. It was years after principal photography ended that *The Evil Dead* was finally completed and given theatrical distribution. It took still more time for this flick about five kids getting possessed by demons and most disgustingly destroyed while staying at an isolated cabin in the woods to gain popularity (and notoriety) on the video rental market. Word-of-mouth finally spread about this weird piece of work – a torrent of blood and gore made up of wild camera angles, arch surrealism, and oftentimes unintended humor.

**F**rom humble beginnings, *The Evil Dead* ascended to the rank of a bona fide cult classic, enough so that producer Dino De Laurentiis saw the potential profitability of a sequel to the film. The result, *Evil Dead II: Dead by Dawn*, can also lay claim to having beaten the odds. Horror sequels have a not-undeserved reputation for being bad films; too many of them are repetitive, derivative, and cynical. But *Evil Dead II* is none of these things. It is a film that retains the spirited inventiveness of its predecessor but has a higher budget, greater technical sophistication, and an entirely different tone. Sam Raimi – yes, A-list director Raimi began as the precocious mastermind of *The Evil Dead* – goes for the jugular and the funny bone simultaneously, unexpectedly melding the antic humor of Tex Avery cartoons and the Three Stooges with heavy duty (if tongue-in-cheek) gore, manufacturing his own brand of hyperactive phantasmagoria, which he dubbed “splatstick.”

**E**vil *Dead II* begins with a fairly standard horror voice-over about the Necronomicon, a book with the power to raise the dead, then reintroduces the audi-

ence to Bruce Campbell’s Ash (*The Evil Dead*’s only survivor) and his girlfriend Linda, who is quickly dispatched for the second time in the series (a bit of review for the uninitiated). The action moves quickly, the acting is broad, and we aren’t entirely sure what sort of movie we are watching. Then suddenly Campbell is lifted by an invisible force, whipped through the forest at a breakneck speed, and spun upside down, before being dropped, face-first, in a large puddle of muddy water. As off balance as we are, now we know – this is a particularly crazed kind of comedy, and what’s more, a movie that goes for broke, charged with ferocious creativity and a cheeky sense of the absurd.

**T**here are plenty of moments to follow when portions of the audience will be laughing while others are covering their eyes, and some may be doing a bit of both. After poor Linda is dead, buried, resurrected, and dismembered, Campbell spends much of *Evil Dead II*’s



first forty minutes alone, with innumerable horrors from Raimi’s imagination to torture him. Wide-eyed Campbell, a high-school friend of Raimi’s and co-producer of the film who is thoroughly clued in to the method of his director’s madness, gives a virtuoso slapstick performance. His adroit physical comedy is best exemplified by a knock-down, drag-out fight with his own hand in which the actor’s appendage really does seem to be a separate – and quite nasty – entity that hurls its owner about and smashes dishes over his head. The scene culminates with Campbell hacking off the malicious hand with a chainsaw, only to have it continue to crawl about and torment him once free. More inspired and insane gags follow. Blood pours into the cabin from a series of holes in the wall, one minute seeming poised to drown Campbell, the next disappearing altogether. A mounted deer head on the wall laughs at Campbell’s misery, and every inanimate object in the room

– a lamp, a clock, some books, the chair – joins in. The unrelenting nature of the supernatural forces that target our hero becomes an unspoken running joke, an extreme distortion of the tenacity of horror villains – and horror sequels.

**I**t’s true that the horror-comedy was by no means a new concept when *Evil Dead II* had its theatrical release in 1987. Touches of humor graced the classic films of James Whale, Abbott and Costello met Frankenstein (plus Dracula and the Wolf Man) in the ‘40s, and *An American Werewolf in London* had given us a distinctively uneasy mix of terror and laughs. What distinguishes *Evil Dead II* is that it isn’t a horror film with comic moments or a comedy with frightening moments. It is instead a true horror-comedy that taps into the fact that both comedy and horror rely on weirdness, incongruity, and shock. Something catches us off guard, and we laugh or we scream. There is footage of Raimi on the set of *Evil Dead II* explaining the inspiration for one of the film’s more memorable gags, an eyeball flying out of a ghoulish socket and squarely into a screaming girl’s mouth. The director explains that he’s really filming “the horror version” of a Three Stooges gag in which an air-borne grape lands in the gullet of an unsuspecting opera singer.

**W**ith its unique tone and ingenious execution, *Evil Dead II* became not just one of the best and most celebrated horror films of the past twenty-five years, but also one of the most influential. To his credit, Raimi chose not to cover the same ground again when it came time to direct a third *Evil Dead* film. He instead rounded out his cult trilogy with *Army of Darkness*, a good-natured adventure spoof that has become a classic in its own rite. There was no need for Raimi to repeat himself, but many horror directors have taken their cues from *Evil Dead II* with varying degrees of success. *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson’s *Dead Alive* has the same zany cartoon sensibility and ups the ante on gross-outs, if not innovation, while 1999’s considerably less inspired *Idle Hands* essentially stretched *Evil Dead II*’s possessed hand gag to feature length. In recent years there have been some fine horror-comedies, like *Shaun of the Dead* and the gleefully disgusting *Slither*, each owing a debt to Raimi’s gooey masterpiece, but *Evil Dead II* still feels fresh and is still essential viewing. There may be no other movie that understands so well the close relationship between laughter and screams.

Written by Victoria Large

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