

Film a genre crossover

RAZING ARIZONA

by Ian Johnston

Its makers refer to it as an "intense erotic thriller filled with extraordinary images", but *Near Dark* is really just another vampire movie. Like recent predecessors like *Fright Night*, *Vamp* and *The Lost Boys*, it's full of lots of blood-letting, stylish clothing and kinky sex.

Though it treads on familiar ground, *Near Dark* does occasionally skake off the conventions of its genre to give the audience some truly inspired moments of dark humour, visual beauty, and suspense.

Near Dark opens at dusk as self-styled ladies' man Caleb picks up a strange beauty named Mae on the outskirts of Fix, Arizona.

As you might expect, Mae is no ordinary pick-up. She's a vampire, part of a motley gang of blood-sucking outlaws who travel the desert in an endless search for blood. One bite from Mae and Caleb is hooked on the woman and on her appealing nocturnal way of life.

And it does seem rather appealing. Writer Eric Red (who wrote the script for the underrated *The Hitcher*) and director Kathryn Bigelow have concocted a surprisingly likeable group of modern Western villains. Surprising because they are all brutal killers.

But like Bonnie and Clyde, they are also a charming group of murderers who offer Caleb an exciting way of life far removed from his lonely ranch existence.

The reference to Bonnie and Clyde and westerns is no accident. *Near Dark* takes much more of its inspiration from



Don't be fooled . . . it's a vampire movie

gangster classic and spaghetti westerns than from the legend of Nosferatu.

A shootout sequence in *Near Dark*, for instance, bears more than a passing resemblance to the Barrow gang's narrow escape from the law in the early part of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Except, in *Near Dark*, it's not bullets but shafts of sunlight that threaten the gang.

This bizarre marriage of genres gives this movie much of its charm. It allows the writer and director to exploit some of the more familiar aspects of past films. But with the element of horror thrown in, there's no risk of repetition.

Not all aspects of the film work as well. Although Bigelow's editing and camera work bring out the beauty and evil of the desert landscape, Red's script has several unpardonable lapses in logic.

Caleb's father, for example, is a homespun rancher, yet he is able to accept his son's vampirism with little difficulty, and finds a cure before the next sundown. Pa Cartwright move over.

Near Dark features fine performances by all the main characters, particularly Lance Henriksen, who played the android in *Aliens*, Bill Paxton, who played the mouthy marine in *Aliens*, and Joshua Miller, the mouthy brother in *River's Edge*, who never appeared in *Aliens*, as the male portion of the vampire gang.

Miller, in particular, gives a disturbing, vicious portrayal of a 75-year-old vampire locked in a 12-year-old body. Sort of a psychopathic Peter Pan. As is the

case in most films, great performances make you overlook even the most absurd plot twists.

But then again, if you accept on faith vampires driving a black van through the Arizona desert, you probably don't need much coaxing to like *Near Dark* anyway.

Gazette music trivia

1. Which performer of the 1950s and '60s was known as "The Killer"?
2. Which Motown star was known as "Mr. Excitement"?
3. Who is called "The hardest working man in show business"?
4. Who was officially known as the "Queen of Disco Music"? (Not Donna Summer!)
5. The "Lizard King" was a star of the 1960s and '70s. Name him.
6. Which two songwriters called themselves "The Glimmer Twins"?
7. Bob Smith changes his name when he worked for a California radio station. What is his better-known name?
8. Mr. Domino called himself "Fats", but what was his real first name?
9. One of the guitar greats is known as "Old Slowhand". Who is he?
10. Ernest Evans changed his name to what?

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