

## Dark Vision of the Future in Atmospheric 'Stake Land'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 29, 2011 - 8:43am

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Playing not unlike a much darker version of “Zombieland” (in that the post-apocalyptic creatures are similar and the veteran/rookie duo at the core not far off Woody & Jesse), “Stake Land” is a confident piece of genre filmmaking that not only deserves a wider audience but hints at truly great things to come for its talented director. It’s far from perfect but it’s incredibly promising, unlike the future of the characters it presents.

I know, I know — Haven’t we seen this before? Post-apocalyptic tales seem as common in the post-9/11 decade as romantic comedies (and usually less terrifying). It is easy to understand why viewers may be exhausted by this overdone genre. Add the fact that this post-apocalypse is filled with the bloodsucking, flesh-eating creatures dominating the overdone vampire genre and it’s easy to see why movie goers may take a pass. Don’t. “Stake Land” is an accomplished piece of filmmaking with some striking visuals, well-done action scenes, and clever twists of storytelling. The acting diminishes the piece a bit as none of the cast quite delivers and the dialogue can be a bit cheesy but enough of the other elements work that it’s easily worth a look, especially for horror fans.



Stake Land

Photo credit: IFC Films

In a world overrun by not just vampires but the cannibals and religious zealots left behind by what happens when food and structure disappear, an orphaned teenager named Martin (Connor Paolo) becomes basically the apprentice to a grizzled veteran named Mister (Nick

Damici). Mister plays no games. He has no witty banter. He decides, for reasons unknown, to save Martin and teach him the art of staking vampires — It's not as easy here to crack a breastbone as in some vampire fiction.

But vampires (and, keep in mind, these are the speedy, "28 Days Later..." variety of vampires) are far from the only problem for Martin and Mister. As they move north to try and find New Eden, they come across a nun (Kelly McGillis) who is about to be raped. Mister kills the two freaks about to commit such a heinous act, crossing paths with a cult leader (Michael Cerveris of "Fringe"), who has basically created his own society with very different rules. They find other survivors on their trek north (including horror icons Danielle Harris and Larry Fessenden) and director Jim Mickle and co-writer Damici clearly imply that the world of "Stake Land" would be a brutal, vicious, awful place even without vampires.



Stake Land

Photo credit: IFC Films

The problems with "Stake Land" are mostly peripheral and could easily be fixed with Mickle's next effort. Narration by Martin, especially heavy in the first act, is leaden, obvious, and unnecessary. We don't need "*Sometimes hope is all you got*" or "*She was pregnant...but I guess life goes on.*" Horror fans are smart enough to see the pregnancy and think about what that means in a world this brutal. Mickle & Damici have some great ideas, but the execution is sometimes a bit too straightforward in terms of dialogue and character motivation.

The film often works best in its quietest moments, as Mister & Martin are ambushed by the sound of a crying baby or a small moment of peace in a bar that clearly is one of the few safe havens left for miles or the silence as they find a house filled with the dead. The on-the-nose narration and even some of the overdone set pieces (a vamp hanging of the car of a window doesn't quite work) pull "Stake Land" out of what it does best. Although there is a chaotic bit involving vampires falling from the sky that is damn brilliant.



Stake Land

Photo credit: IFC Films

And what does is best is pretty damn impressive. As a horror junkie, I see a lot of films in the genre with little visual sensibility. Mickle has proven (with this and the quite-good "Mulberry Street," another post-apocalyptic tale from the "After Dark" collection of 2007) that he has been inspired by the right directors — George A. Romero & David Cronenberg being two obvious influences. So many horror films seem to come either from a machine or from people who may have been inspired by certain genre classics but who have no real awareness of why. Mickle knows what works about Romero, finding the balance between atmosphere, plot, and the inherent nihilism of a future dominated by death and violence.

Perhaps most importantly, "Stake Land" is emotionally resonant. It's dark without being overly cliched. It's interesting, even in a genre that's simply overdone nowadays. We could talk all day about what this film does right and what it does wrong but the main reason you need to see it is that I can't wait to see what Jim Mickle does next. The genre could use more directors like him.

*"Stake Land" stars Connor Paolo, Nick Damici, Kelly McGillis, Michael Cerveris, and Danielle Harris. It was written by Damici & Jim Mickle and directed by Mickle. It was released in Chicago on April 29th, 2011 and is unrated.*



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