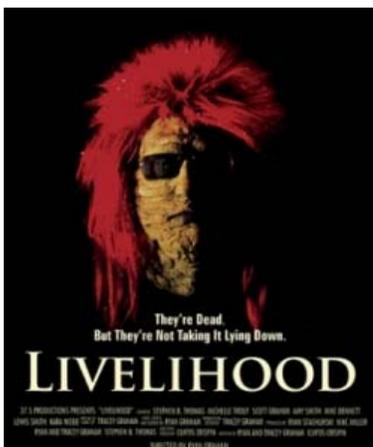


BLOODY REVIEWS: Livelihood (2005)

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**LIVELIHOOD**

(2005)

dir. by Ryan Graham

ZOMBIES ARE PEOPLE TOO, MAN

by Armando Valle

(Note: You can read our exclusive interview with Ryan and Tracey Graham about this film [here](#).)

Watch out, man! Behind you! BANG! Nice shot, man. A good shot, man. Got that zombie right between the eyes. Hold on a minute. I gotta present this review.

As you can see, zombies are everywhere these days. A Zombie film renaissance started over a couple of years ago with the release of **Danny Boyle's** *28 Days Later*, and it continued with the successful 2004 remake of *Dawn Of The Dead*. Hell, even the delightful 'zom rom com' *Shaun Of The Dead* helped to bring undead awareness to cinemas in late 2004. Unfortunately, the gas seems to have run out of the tank with the recent disappointing domestic run of **George Romero's** *Land Of The Dead*, a noble effort which audiences didn't warm up to. For zombie films to succeed in the future, new, fresh approaches to the genre are necessary. The good ole 'they wanna eat your brains' approach just doesn't scare kiddies the way it used to. So, if you can't scare 'em, you might as well make them laugh heartily--this worked well for *Shaun Of The Dead*. Baltimore indie filmmaker, **Ryan Graham** and his wife **Tracey**, have taken a good step forward in these pursuits with their first indie feature, *Livelihood*. And although the end results aren't earth-shattering, *Livelihood*, with it's accomplished indie ambitions, takes an original step in the right direction for zombie horror films, as it also steps forward as a thoughtful piece of satire.

Euuwww, there are brains all over this wall! Hold on. Back to the review.

Livelihood is actually a trilogy of zombie stories set (and shot completely on location) in Baltimore, MD. Billy Jump (**Stephen B. Thomas**), a hair metal rocker, dies, electrocuted by his guitar after a drug-alcohol binge. Alexander (**Scott Graham**), a goody-two-shoes corporate slave, gets decapitated by a Samurai assassin sent by his conniving wife to snuff out his pathetic, groveling existence. Vida (**Michelle Trout**), a controlling mother-in-law dies after eating some poisoned tapioca pudding, which may have been set up by his overburdened daughter-in-law. All three characters come back to life, but not to the typical horror scenario explored by countless zombie horror films. Where *Livelihood* strays from the well-trodden path, and breaks into new territory, is that these zombies come back to life aching to go back to their regular old lives. There's no hunger for brains or flesh in these zombies, instead they just want to resume their everyday existence in their homes, their jobs, their routines.... their 'livelihood'.

Shite, see now I got zombie brains all over my shirt! Pass me a napkin. Okay, there's way too much gore on this napkin but thanks anyways.. I guess.

In this sense, writer/director **Ryan Graham** has composed a funny, at times melancholic, and even thought-provoking piece, in which the state of undead becomes an analogy, and perhaps even a liberating statement, for many social and humanistic ills. Billy Jump learns a thing or two about life when he comes back, his gargantuan ego deflated by decaying body parts, and tries to put his old metal band back together. At the same time, he confronts the evils of the big record company—with the tongue-in-cheek name of KashGrab Records--which refuses to bankroll his musical comeback. Corporate slave Alexander gets a harsh wake-up call when he returns to work for his cruel boss, and makes a misguided attempt to reconcile with his serial-cheating wife, who ordered his murder. Alexander finally discovers what it truly means to be alive (which is more than taking in oxygen and having a beating heart) when he strikes up a romance with Zoe, the boss' daughter with a heart of gold. Vida, on the other hand, doesn't learn anything, but instead returns to continue to control her son and to exact revenge and verbal cruelty on her daughter-in-law. But her daughter-in-law (Amy Smith) has some murderous plans to dispatch of her Joan-Crawfordesque evil ways once and for all.



Now, what are we going to do with all these bodies. I know...Come on and help me put them on a pile and burn them. Oh, God, this one is heavy... and is still holding onto a bag of Mickey D's.

These stories are woven together by several original--and hilarious--mock-commercials which reveal, and revel in, the changed landscape of the nation after a zombie epidemic that didn't exactly reach catastrophic proportions but instead caused profound social change. These campy, smart ad-snippets are the result of Graham's collaboration with local Baltimore filmmakers **Better Hollywood Productions (Nikc Miller, Erika Holsey, Mike and John Bennett)** and Pasquinade Films (Dallas Shelby). Featuring original music from Graham and Miller's musical group, **The Dirty Marmaduke Fluke Squad**, pieces like 'Pitt Wax', 'Intestine Tract', 'Zombie Soap Opera', 'Zombie Rest Home' and 'Free Cash for Zombies' add much-inspired humor to the film. They also help to reinforce the absurd notion of a society in which the undead have merely become a new class of citizen--one that struggles for acceptance, faces discrimination, and yes, one that must be marketed to.

Pass me the lighter. WOOSSH!! Woah, look at 'em burn. Ack! The stench--smells like roasted dead pig!

Ryan and Tracey Graham pull all this adeptly together despite the film's ultra-low budget, which Ryan commented in this [just published interview](#) with BloodyNews as being merely the cost of a 1995 Ford Taurus! Shot on MiniDV, and heavily worked-on in post-production with an array of cine filters, *Livelihood* must be commended for its cinematography, which looks on par with many indie films shot on actual film. The Graham's did practically everything in the film themselves, and with good results: from the film's

score (Ryan), to the digital effects, down to the gory special effects (Tracey), which pay tribute to the work of genre great, **Tom Savini** (the film also pays tribute to the work of **Sam Raimi**, **Charlie Chaplin**, and even **Ayn Rand**). The results of hundreds of hours of personal time spent on the film is a feature which looks, sounds and feels as accomplished as many indie films which cost ten times as much to produce; not an easy feat to accomplish for a couple of filmmakers who admittedly never went to film school, had full-time jobs through the production of the feature, and who strongly adhered to a DIY philosophy of filmmaking.

O'right.. let's go and take a break for lunch. Pass me the machete—I can't get this one to let go of my leg. Got it—Chopped that arm right off!

Good, strong performances by local Baltimore, MD actors also help to anchor the film: **Stephen B. Thomas** as rocker Billy Jump delivers hilarious moments even though his mummified character can't no longer put coherent speech together (well, not unless he sings his lines out). Two actors coincidentally named **Scott Graham**--one unrelated to, and the other the director's father--portray adversarial roles as Alexander, the corporate slave, and the other, Alexander's over-the-top sadistic boss. Actress **Michelle Trout** channels **Joan Crawford** in all her vindictive, campy self in her performance as Vida, the evil mother-in-law. **Amy** and **Lew Smith** play a seemingly happy couple. **Bradley Burgess** lets it all hang out as flaming-gay band member Stevie Sierra. And in smaller--but key--hilarious roles, **Nikc Miller**, **John Bennett**, and **Mike Bennett** of **Better Hollywood Productions** steal scenes. Specially, **Mike Bennett**, as deaf keyboard player, *Vigo*, livens scenes substantially with his innate comedic talent.



Watch out. There are a few stragglers over there. God, current fashions looks downright out of style on zombies, don't they? Hey, that one over there has an Ipod. Go and get it for me, will ya? I want me an Ipod.

Despite everything *Livelihood* has going for itself, there are several troublesome aspects-- at least on the film's premiere cut--bigger of all the film's excessive length. The premiere cut of the film runs slightly over 2 hours long, not an ideal length for neither a horror film, or an indie film. This issue is made the more glaring by the fact that all three stories in the film aren't as equally funny or compelling. For example, Billy Jump/Rock Zombie is energetic and mostly hilarious, while the Alexander/Corporate Zombie story seems more concerned with melancholic tones and golden-age-of-Hollywood light-romantic-comedy, making it a slower affair. The Mother-In-Law story is equally as funny as Billy Jump's, but could use some slight cuts. All this gives the overall film an uneven tone, since the Billy and Vida stories seem in sync with one another, but unfortunately, the Alexander story feels as if it should be another film entirely; one that's more light and melodramatic, with acting and dialogue more reminiscent of silent era/early Hollywood films. There's also a missed opportunity for more complex, deeper storytelling, as the three stories don't intersect with one another. It would have been more fascinating to see these characters weave in and out of each other's stories. Regardless, the film's major flaw is its length, and I can see myself giving a higher rating to an edited version of the piece--say, 15 minutes shorter. (**Note: Ryan Graham** admits that the film is too long, and since the film's premiere he has trimmed 18 minutes from the film. I've not yet seen the new version and this review is of the premiere cut.)



Ahhh, yes, this Ipod is nice. What the--ARRRGHHHH!!! Fuck, it bit me!! The zombie, not the Ipod--you fool! You let one of them through and it bit.. Goddamn, it took a chunk of my shoulder off... Ow,ow,ow,ow!

But its drawn-out length notwithstanding, *Livelihood* is a very worthy indie film effort from a couple of very driven, highly committed filmmakers, who stretched all available resources to make their first film. It's a film that deserves to be seen, and should find a nice home at select film festivals around the nation. It's also a piece which truly can stand on its own against the onslaught of direct-to-DVD materials on the shelves at any Blockbuster video. **Ryan** and **Tracey Graham** wrote, produced, directed, composed, and simply pushed out with all their might an indie horror-comedy first-feature that serves as a great starting point to an interesting film career. Their film also serves as an example of what can be done by driven, impassioned people who choose to get off their ass to make their dreams happen. For its fresh take on the zombie genre, its absurd faux-TV commercials, and its 'can do' indie ambitions, *Livelihood* is a crafty movie which will surely find an audience that will gladly adopt it. Its journey in search of an audience starts today--Good luck to the Grahams. Be on the lookout for *Livelihood* in a film festival or video store shelf near you in the future.

You know what.. now that I'm bitten and will irrevocably turn into one of these rotten flesheaters, maybe it won't that bad. Maybe I can still keep it together. I can come back.. continue to make movies, write for BloodyNews--hey, the first ever zombie writer/filmmaker don't sound too bad? Maybe it can be like in Ryan's film... Ohhhhhh, everything's going cloudy. Groooovvyyy. Here I go--

(For more info and updates about the film, you may go to livelihoodmovie.com)