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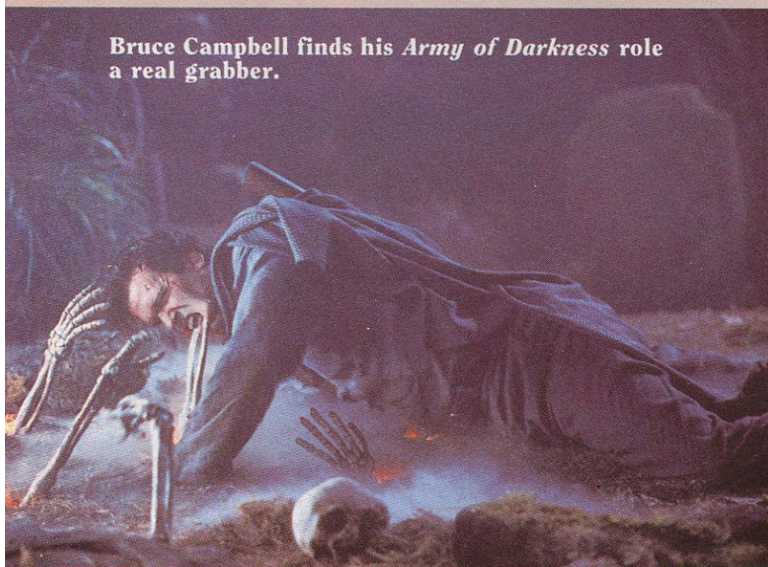
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REVIEW

Sam Raimi's new shockbuster boasts more ghouls than the first two *Evil Dead* films combined.



Bruce Campbell finds his *Army of Darkness* role a real grabber.



Photos: Melissa Moseley/Copyright 1992 Universal

ARMY OF DARKNESS

"Although the big battle scene rattles along at an impressive pace, the almost total absence of bloodletting will surely disappoint hardcore genre fans."

By MARK KERMODE



Ash's fight with the pit monster was taking too long, so his captors decided to end it prematurely.

Long before Sam Raimi cemented his reputation as the ascendant prince of low-budget horror with *The Evil Dead*, he and his college pals were making super-8 slapstick shorts inspired by the antics of the Three Stooges. Throughout Raimi's career, the ghosts of the legendary comic trio have haunted his films—sometimes enlivening, but occasionally undermining his work. Both *Evil Dead* and its first sequel were achievements in that they operated *within* the conventions of both horror and comedy without patronizing or bastardizing either. With consummate skill, Raimi managed to marry

oppositional generic traits (the insane, kinetic logic of slapstick and the paranoid claustrophobia of horror), intensifying rather than diluting the experience of both to create that rarest fusion: the terrifying comedy. The introspective Gothic melodrama *Darkman* was far less sure-footed, using comedy as a crutch whenever Raimi's confidence in the film's "serious themes" started to flag.

There's no danger of comedy appearing out of place in *Army of Darkness*, however. This latest in the *Evil Dead* saga is essentially a series of slapstick setpieces in which a menagerie of caricatured characters (both alive and dead) hit each other over the head with an assortment of metaphorical frying pans. While the first two *Evil Dead* films were full-blooded horror movies laced with savage, biting humor, this disjointed third chapter is a comedy first and foremost, tipping its hat only vaguely in the direction of horror. Ironically, the film bears the strongest resemblance not to the *Evil Dead* films, but to *Crimewave*, the high-speed slapstick farce which Raimi disowned when it was extensively re-edited by its distributors.

Like *Crimewave*, *Army of Darkness* has suffered from a severely troubled production history, one which has clearly blunted Raimi's original vision. Having planned to shoot his medieval epic in Britain (where crumbling castles are plentiful and atmospheric landscapes abound), the director was forced by a restrictive budget to film in the faceless surroundings of California, and to rely upon the "miracle" of Introvision to provide the requisite ram-parts. Predictably, much of the moody grandeur expected of *The Medieval Dead* (Raimi's preferred title) is sadly missing; for all its technical wizardry, *Army of Darkness* is beset by poor superimposition and gaudily artificial sets which reveal the film's financial shortcomings. To Raimi's credit, he partially manages to turn this handicap to his advantage by playing upon a nostalgia for the artifice-laden fantasies of

the early '70s. "It's OK," he seems to be saying. "I know this looks tacky, but that's how it's *meant* to look..."

Having been sucked into the vortex at the end of *Evil Dead II*, our hero Ash (Bruce Campbell) finds himself stuck in the Dark Ages. His battle for survival soon turns into a struggle to unite bands of feuding warriors to challenge the armies of the dead, who are currently laying siege to the film's human heroes. Captured by a particularly hostile group of hairy medieval thugs (Raimi's admiration for Terry Gilliam and the Monty Python team shows through clearly here), Campbell rises to instant hero status by chain-sawing a fiendish Deadite monster to pieces in a gladiatorial pit. Unfortunately, the dismemberment of the KNB EFX gang's creation is kept offscreen, and despite a deliciously promising early geyser of blood (slyly reminiscent of Johnny Depp's demise in *A Nightmare on Elm Street*), the gore score is kept disappointingly low.

Turning his back on the gruesome antics of his earlier work, Raimi opts instead to pay tribute to such classic Ray Harryhausen movies as *Jason and the Argonauts* and *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*. Using dated but entertaining stop-motion techniques not much advanced from Harryhausen's original Dynamation work, the FX team conjures up armies of skeletons who rise from their graves to

wreak havoc on the land of the living. By superimposing close-up makeup FX against huge animated vistas of puppet skeleton warriors, Raimi creates an epic battlefield which owes more to comic books than any horror tradition. Substantially cut since the film's first showing at the Sitges Film Festival, the big battle scene now rattles along at an impressive pace, although the almost total absence of bloodletting will surely disappoint hardcore genre fans; plunging a spear into a bag of rampaging dry bones will never replace a good, gutsy disembowelment!

Unsurprisingly, the script is less tongue-in-cheek than pie-in-face, and Campbell's comic talents are presented in full force throughout. "OK, She-Bitch, let's go!" he declares in one marvelous moment, while in another he grabs a lusty maiden (Embeth Davidtz) and anachronistically demands, "Gimme some sugar!" Most impressively, in a scene which echoes the rebellious hand sequence from *Evil Dead II*, Campbell sprouts a secondary head and proceeds to beat the hell out of himself in side-splitting fashion. Worse indignities yet are in store when Ash magically splinters into a thousand tiny parts (thanks to Alterian Studios' Tony Gardner) and is forced to trample enthusiastically upon his divided self.

Since the initial completion of *Army of Darkness*, Campbell and Raimi have been per-

suaded to insert a new climax. So it's giving nothing away to reveal that, in this early print (which may never be seen again), Ash ends up in even more trouble than he was in when the movie began. Having accidentally overdosed on a miraculous drug which should allow him to snooze through centuries and awake in his own time, Ash emerges from hypersleep 100 years too late and discovers only the wreckage of (post-nuclear?) civilization. Locating the movie firmly in Britain, Campbell is seen surveying an extremely tacky backdrop montage which depicts the crumbled form of Big Ben, evoking the final moments of *Planet of the Apes*. According to the filmmakers, this final sucker-punch was considered too "downbeat" by the money men, so Raimi and company were forced to change it.

If you're looking for knockabout laughs, inventive humor and shameless homages to a bygone age, *Army of Darkness* delivers the goods. Raimi has always been a kidder at heart, and no one tells a good, grisly joke quite like this elfin talent. But the gut-churning magic of *The Evil Dead* has been lost along the way, and for those of us who like their comedy razor-sharp and meaty, there is little here to sink our teeth into. The mainstream has beckoned, and Hollywood has gained a major talent. Sadly, the horror genre has lost one. Come back, Sam. We miss you.

Forget his ugly face; what really turns Sheila (Embeth Davidtz) off is that Evil Ash is as dumb as Good Ash.

