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FRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

THEY LIVE! THE NEXT GENERATION OF HORROR DIRECTORS WILL SCARE YOU SENSELESS • BY MAITLAND McDONAGH

REPORTS OF THE HORROR FILM'S DECLINE INTO A SORRY swamp of spoofs and send-ups have been greatly exaggerated—if understandably so, given all the *Screams* and *Scary Movies* of recent years. But there's still an endless supply of bloody-minded optimists, like the splatter junkies immortalized in the documentary *American Movie*, putting together ultra-low-budget scare pictures. Most of what they make is junk, of course, but every once in a while a *Blair Witch Project* slithers out of the shadows and under your skin. The good news is that these are horror boom times, and a slew of writers and directors are waiting to scare you witless.

Witness the fresh young blood flowing through the genre's veins. The English tag-team of Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright, 34 and 30, delivers a pitch-perfect blend of comedy and flat-out zom-

bie mayhem in *Shaun of the Dead*. Australian James Wan, 26, is the director of the seriously nasty serial-killer fable *Saw*, out in October. Brad Anderson, 40, who made his 1998 debut with the romantic-comedy charmer *Next Stop Wonderland*, put on a scary face with 2001's *Session 9* and hasn't looked back. His nightmarish thriller *The Machinist*, also out in October and starring Christian Bale, is a Kafkaesque descent into sleep-deprived madness. The 26-year-old French filmmaker Alexandre Aja's grisly neo-slasher picture *Haute Tension* opens in early 2005. Holding down the American end are *Cabin Fever* writer-director Eli Roth, 32, who followed up his debut feature by forming a boutique horror-production house called Raw Nerve, and Dante Tomaselli, 34, whose third independent feature, *Satan's Playground*, is due out by the end of the year.

"I'M GETTING A LOT OF SCRIPTS FOR REMAKES SENT MY WAY, AND I'M GOING, 'YOU GUYS WANT TO REMAKE THAT?'" SAYS *SAW* DIRECTOR JAMES WAN. "THAT'S SACRILEGE—I DON'T THINK WE SHOULD BE REMAKING DAVID CRONENBERG MOVIES JUST YET!"

"It's great that filmmakers want to scare us again," says Tony Timpone, editor of *Fangoria* magazine. "The self-reflexive stuff is played out, and after the *Scary Movie* parodies there was nowhere to go with that formula. So we're back to straight and scary. The idea of seeing a brand-new horror movie on Friday night is enough to get people out in droves."

You could be forgiven for imagining that *Shaun of the Dead*, a whip-smart British spin on George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, is part of the ongoing parody trend—a hungover, oblivious slacker (co-writer Pegg) and his couch-potato pal (Nick Frost) don't even realize that there's an apocalypse of the living dead going on until they're milling around their garden. If that's not the stuff of low laughs, what is? "We slightly stitched ourselves up by having a punning

title that made people expect a spoof," admits Wright, the film's director and co-writer. "I think *Variety* hit the nail on the head when they said the worst joke in *Shaun of the Dead* was the title."

But it's vulgar parody that kills genuine horror, not the perfectly placed black joke: *Shaun's* first half-hour is filled with light relationship laughs in classic Brit-com mode, but once the filmmakers let the cannibal zombies rip, the chuckles strangle in your throat. "The thing of it is, the comedy's funny and the horror's horrible," Wright explains. "Simon and I really took our cues from the original Romero zombie films on the one hand and *An American Werewolf in London* on the other. *American Werewolf* is one of our favorite films. You like the characters and they say funny stuff because they're funny people, but what happens to them is tragic and horrible."