Review: The Dark Half (1993)

Director: George A. Romero

Writer: George A. Romero. Based on the book by Stephen King

Starring: Timothy Hutton, Amy Madigan, Michael Rooker, Robert Joy and Julie Harris

“You are disturbing my peaceful frame of mind” – George Stark

Writer Thad Beaumont (Hutton) has had a successful career writing lurid pulp novels under the pseudonym George Stark. When threatened with exposure Thad and his wife Liz (Madigan) decide to act first and come public. As a gimmick a faux funeral is staged for Stark with the writing “Not a very nice guy” on the tombstone. Soon after the event Stark himself (also Hutton) appears and starts killing off Thad’s associates and this murderous alter ego has some deadly designs on his creator.

“The Dark Half” is definately a second tier Romero film when you think of his classics and it’s most certainly a middle of the road novel for King. But the film improves markedly on the book by making some subtle changes and further cementing the otherworldly relationship between author and his fictional creation which (with no agreeable explanation in book or film) suddenly springs to life.

In “The Dark Half” there’s a sheriff named Alan Pangborn (Rooker) and he takes up quite a lot space in the book. He’s actually the one who pieces together the mystery of Thad’s twin (a tumour inside his head that was actually another fetus that was absorbed in the womb). In the film Alan is much more of a supporting character and Thad is the one who gradually discovers the real nature of the tumour as that piece of information was kept from him as a child. While Romero the screenwriter sticks fairly close to the source material it’s those little differences in the “Thad/George” relationship which are further explained in the film (in a way) but frustratingly left out in the book. The dual nature of man; i.e. every man has two sides, one violent and the other a complacent one that suppresses many emotions, is a solid point which is much better handled in the film.

That is in no small part due to Hutton’s fantastic performance in both roles. Evidently the actor was a pain to work with but his method acting techniques resulted in a very convincing depiction of Thad as a passive (and surprisingly clumsy) individual that gets to tap into his dark side and ultimately manifest it in the form of George Stark; again fantastically played by Hutton who really lets loose in the part. Thad’s admiration for the inhibitions of his dark half is ultimately what gives it life.

Romero was given a larger than usual budget and overall the film looks very good with some nicely atmospheric lighting and photography on occasion. You’d kinda’ expect it to be a bit bloodier given the material but it’s surprisingly toned down (some descriptions in the book were very vivid) while remaining fairly brutal all the same. The real letdown comes when some very primitive CGI is used for the finale which involves A LOT of sparrows and as a result the fairly ludicrous ending (identical in book and film) ends the film on a bit of a whimper.

“The Dark Half” never really took off and just sort of vanished but it’s due some re-appraisal for the numerous things it gets right. Romero takes his time (the movie clocks in at over 2 hours) and some very good actors get to delve into their roles; particularly Rooker and Madigan. “The Haunting” (1963) star Julie Harris is also noteworthy in the part of Thad’s colleague who ultimately unlocks the key to Stark’s secret and his connection to Thad (that is another part that was expanded upon from the book and it’s a good change). Plus the core material is strong and wildly imaginative even if it never gets a satisfactory explanation.

Physical copy:

My copy of “The Dark Half” is the recently released Region B Blu-ray from Eureka Entertainment. It sports decent A/V quality that, by all reports, is identical to the Region A Blu-ray from Scream Factory issued in 2014. The biggest extra is a 36 minute retrospective where Romero among others discuss the film in a candid manner. There’s also a few deleted and extended scenes, a documentary on Romero that aired in 1989, an audio commentary with Romero and a booklet.

All in all a solid package from the reliable label.

Why physical copy?

I always encourage the acquisition of physical copies as I dread the day when films will only exist as files on computers and through streaming services. The companies that put the effort into making the discs, create new artwork or reproduce the originals, issue booklets and much more deserve all the financial support they can. Therefore I will always mention the Blu-rays or DVD’s (and yes; also if I review something streamed through Netflix or the like) even though I gain nothing from it personally.