

Splattering of applause

BRAD WHEELER
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Evil Dead: The Musical

Directed by Christopher Bond

and Hinton Battle

Book and lyrics by

George Reinblatt

Starring Ryan Ward

and Sarah Cornell

At the Diesel Playhouse in Toronto to June 23 (416-971-5656)

Two randy young couples and one mope head off to the woods, planning to break into a cabin, not telling a soul where they're going. "What could go wrong," one of them asks? Plenty.

Plenty goes right, too, especially for lovers of self-referential comedy, idiotic horror films, cascading corpuscles and cartoon-y music numbers. Based on Sam Raimi's first two *Evil Dead* movies (signature lines from which drew cheers at the Diesel Playhouse), the silly *Evil Dead: The Musical* is bloody fantastic.

New York critics and camp fans went bonkers last year for the off-Broadway hit, but O.J. Simpson thought there was a bit too much blood and Samuel Jackson was appalled by the rampant profanity. You can't please everybody.

Oh, sure you can.

It wasn't so much a smattering of applause heard on Thursday; it was a splattering of applause, with front-row fanatics soaked in ruby goo leading the cheers for a foolhardy success story that now appears with a Toronto cast in the city where it all began, back in 2003, at the cozy Tranzac room.

The play was conceived and written by George Reinblatt and chums from Queen's University. After a sporadic five-week run back then, the play moved to Montreal for an appearance at the Just for Laughs comedy festival, then went on to New York at the New World Stages.

Although the zombie musical has since gone through a few changes, one constant has endured: diehard lead actor Ryan Ward played Ash in the first performance in Toronto and originated the role in the off-Broadway production. It is unwise for a boxer to lead with his chin, but it's no problem for the angular Ward to do so. At this point, in the Bruce Campbell movie role, Ward is consummate.

No subtle foreshadowing was at work when he headed down into the cabin basement and brought back a shotgun, gaudy dagger and chainsaw. The saw came in particularly, um, handy. Also brought up from below was a 13th-century spell book (bound in human flesh and inked in blood) and a tape-recording of incantations which activated a ferocious forest. No turning back now.

Musical numbers were wink-wink earnest, including a lovely duet by Ward and girlfriend Linda (Tara Macri) - a perky gal whose pretty head would later need to be chopped off. The brash seventies style of *Look Who's Evil Now* featured freshly demonized versions of Ash's sister (Rachel Fischer) and a ditzzy floozy (Sarah Cornell). A profane tango is followed by an animated-prop scene that's straight out of *Pee Wee's Playhouse*.

The first act ends with a blood-drenched Ash holding his girlfriend's severed head, with his buddy Scott (Matt Olmstead) oozing entrails in the corner. Things get gruesome in Act II.

And corny: The sister, so sullen in real life, is spunky and pig-tailed as a zombie, popping up from a trap door *Laugh In*-style with groaners such as "I'm like Dom DeLuise at an all-you-can-eat fish house, I'll swallow your soul." Doo-wop ballad *All the Men in My Life Keep Getting Killed* by Candarian Demons was a hit, but the big dance number *Do the Necronomicon* failed to live up to its promise to be "just like the *Time Warp*, only better." (Two thumbs up for the gratuitous Henry Winkler references, though.)

The comparisons to *The Rocky Horror Show* are inevitable. *Evil Dead: The Musical* meets the challenge, although there is far less audience interaction involved at this point. Call it, if you will, The Rocky Gore-er Show.

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