

Zombies invade our fair city!

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They've been dominating our movie screens for years and now they're demanding stage time, too. Toronto theatres will experience an unusual surge in the zombie population over the next few weeks, as the undead lurch onto stages all over town.

In one corner is the cult hit *Evil Dead: The Musical* (based, of course, on Sam Raimi's classic B-horror trilogy), which opens at the Diesel Playhouse tonight, returning to Toronto after a successful off-Broadway run in New York (indeed, the New York cast recording is available in stores today). It's chock-full of singing, dancing, blood-soaked zombies.

Meanwhile, playing until May 27 at the Tarragon is *The Pessimist*, Morwyn Brebner's follow-up to last season's acclaimed *The Optimist*. Brebner's zombies are less gory and more metaphorical in nature. "No one gets splattered in blood," she admits. "We probably won't attract the diehard zombie crowd."

That said, Brebner does make a compelling argument for the metaphorical value of the undead. "I think zombies represent our fear of the future and our own powerlessness over it," she says. "The zombie is the most pessimistic and terrifying of movie monsters because it doesn't have intention, really; it's just there. You never triumph over the zombie. There's always only a reprieve. There are always more coming."

Brebner didn't set out to write about zombies. "When I started to write the play, I knew I wanted to write about a married couple and a politician in the country," she explains. "But I didn't know where I was going with it until a friend sent me a Web site about the science of zombies, which scared the crap out of me. And then suddenly the play took shape."

The Pessimist is about a married couple, a writer and an actress, who move to the country when he falls ill. ("All of these things happen in the country --I don't know why people feel safer there," says Brebner. "It's terrifying! There are no people! That's not where you want to be when the bad thing happens!")

"It's my first 'middle class' play," explains Brebner. "My boyfriend describes it as George Romero's *The Seagull*."

On the opposite end of the spectrum sits George Reinblatt, who adapted Sam Raimi's classic horror trilogy to the stage and wrote most of the lyrics. "There are no metaphors or hidden meanings here," he says. "Just gore."

Producer Jeffrey Latimer agrees. "These are zombies that just make you laugh," he says. "There's never any fear of real death. There's only continuous fake death."

Evil Dead: The Musical was first staged on a bare-bones budget at the Annex's Tranzac Club in 2003. "We were just a group of struggling actors and writers looking for a break," says Reinblatt. By the end of that first run, performances were selling out and people were lining up around the corner scrambling for tickets. When Jeff Latimer saw the frenzy, he signed on as producer and remounted the show to the same eager audiences the following year at the Annex Theatre on Bathurst Street, and then at the Montreal Just For Laughs festival.

Evil Dead: The Musical was meant to open at the Diesel Playhouse last summer, but plans for a New York production escalated more quickly than Latimer had anticipated, so Toronto audiences had to wait a few months.

What's remarkable about *Evil Dead* is that it has been drawing a much younger audience than one usually sees at the theatre. Latimer and Reinblatt also say the show has been attracting people who are not regular theatregoers. "It's the only time you'll see a huge group of straight guys going out to a musical," laughs Reinblatt.

So the literal zombies have the gore and the gags (and a talking moose head), but the metaphorical zombies have the substance (and a disappearing pie). It's an undead win-win.

- *The Pessimist* runs until May 27 at the Tarragon Theatre. For tickets, please call 416-531-1827. *Evil Dead: The Musical* opens May 1 at the Diesel Playhouse (416-971- 5656). The soundtrack is available in stores as of today.

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