

*Review: "Les Revenants"*

"Les Revenants": Resurrection, Murky Waters, and Improbable Love

by Faith Hart

I don't like zombie shows. On an obligatory visit to an estranged relative's house as a teenager, I decided I would give "The Walking Dead" a shot. It was playing in the background as pleasantries were exchanged and I figured watching absolutely anything would be better than being a part of that conversation. I was wrong. The show, like many of its zombie-horror contemporaries, relied on the sheer camp of its undead, complete with rotting skin and an insatiable desire for human flesh to grip audiences. I just couldn't get on board. Growing up, I'd groan when a zombie movie made its way into a sleepover movie line-up, wondering why we couldn't watch a movie about living people— or at least sexy vampires (but that's beside the point.)

"Les Revenants", far from a typical "zombie show", wrestles with the tired genre's long-asked questions about death, rebirth, decay, and reconciling with the living in a fresh new way. Unlike most campy horror flicks, the French series explores new existential terrain and paints a complicated portrait of the human condition. "Les Revenants" sheds a hazy light on the tight-knit community of a sleepy mountain town as its quiet stillness creeps out of serenity and into eerie unrest. The town unrelentingly gray and somber, it feels as if the heart of a once-vibrant body has been ripped straight out of its chest. Its citizens are grief-stricken and struggling to move past violent losses— a devastating accident, suicide, and murder.

Against all odds, the French drama depicts these dearly departed as they return to the land of the living. Unaware of their deaths and of the many moons gone by since their demises, they attempt to come home to their loved ones as if all is normal. The first of the returned is the angsty, but affable Camille (Yara Pilartz). A young victim of a tragic school bus accident that ravaged the town's school-age population, she emerges from a grassy canyon and impulsively goes home to make herself a sandwich. Upstairs, her mother Claire (Anne Consigny) lights candles in a tightly-held ritual honoring the lost Camille, until she hears the mysterious rustling in the kitchen. Their tender reunion— a mother and daughter standing on opposite sides of death's chasm— prove the laws of nature to be flimsy and refutable.

One by one, the returned emerge from the underworld and begin to blur the lines of what is possible. Can the love we feel for those who are lost us bring them back to life? Who returns and who is lost forever? Is it possible to regain a lost sense of normalcy in extraordinary circumstances? If the dead returned to us, would we accept them? Does love last "until death do us part" or can it extend in an infinite spiral, brushing the past and future with one stroke? Once a body has been buried, can it ever feel the same again?

"Les Revenants" is a drama teeming with questions but is hesitant to provide answers. It is not a mystery to be solved, but murky water to be submerged in. Where the lore of zombies has always been

predicated on the sheer novelty of their existence, Fabrice Gobert is not interested in explaining the details of how the undead arrived. Chaos abounds around their strange, familiar bodies— scattered power outages, unexplained changes in water levels, the discovery of petrified animals— but this story is centered on their hearts. He weaves a complicated emotional fabric, taking interest in the struggle to keep old love alive when life’s natural order is sundered. Perhaps “Les Revenants”’ greatest gift to audiences is the opportunity to swim in such pure and wild emotion— the same way the history of the Alpine village bubbles up, bursts, and submerges again— without demanding an explanation.

The show’s pacing is admittedly glacial, which is indulged by a relentlessly bland cinematographic color palette and post-rock band Mogwai’s intentionally drone-heavy, repetitive score. As a scrolling-addicted American with a microscopic attention span, I’ll admit that “Les Revenants” is not the kind of material I find myself binging often. At points, it was challenging to watch— its slowness, dimness, and subtitled-ness interrupting the colorful, frenzied circus that is my brain. However, this show reminded me of the sweet romance a viewer can find with a slow-burner that doesn’t lay all its cards on the table too soon.

Maybe romance is not the right word. “Les Revenants” is dark and heavy, its characters imperfect, but I found myself strangely charmed by them and invested in their journeys. Gobert’s artistic mission to create a hauntingly personal emotional landscape of intricate relationships is certainly aided by brilliant, subtle performances across the board. The cast is deeply connected by an ever-so-cool French aloofness, but each character is a vivid portrait and far from cliché.

Camille struggles to find her place while in constant conflict with Lena (Jenna Thiam), her once-identical twin who has developed into a mysterious and beautiful woman who makes her look like something dug out of a time capsule. The actresses approach an unprecedented given circumstance with depth and sensitivity, managing to capture the intimate nature of sisterhood. Victor (Swann Nambotin), an undead child who is as terrifying as he is lovable, forges an unconventional familial relationship with Julie (Céline Sallette). Their love, like resurrection, is improbable but stunning. Sallette and Nambotin have much to be proud of in their authentic, present discovery of what true family is. Perhaps the most poignant vignette of the series, Adèle (Clotilde Hesme) finds herself in a sticky love triangle when her first romance Simon (Pierre Perrier) returns from the grave just in time for her wedding to another man. In Adèle’s struggle to accept Simon’s reality, “Les Revenants” flexes a striking metaphorical muscle: does grief take the form of a body? Does it live with us every day?

The series offers many radical propositions, fighting for ways to forge connection and devotion as the world hurdles forward. Why then, do some of the other characters perpetuate the kind of violence,

sexism, and toxicity that defines our current reality? In a world where anything is possible, the last thing I want to see is a character like the returned Serge (Guillaume Gouix), whose language is predation and domination. Why must Pierre (Jean-François Sivadier), the series' Good Samaritan-type, deal in violence? Though I wrestle to accept "Les Revenants'" obsession with toxic masculinity, I see it being wielded intentionally in order to make a point about the way malignant structures haunt our society even beyond the grave. In the same way I lament when a nasty ex-boyfriend texts me out of the blue, I look to "Les Revenants" and sigh: why, oh why, does the bog spit up the shit we so desperately need to rid ourselves of?

More unsure than ever, I stare out across the dreary Alpine village's gray-blue water, aware of the lifeless and yet pristine bodies beneath the surface, and learn not to expect an answer. All my dealings with death have taught me that grief is a resounding echo, not an interrogation. In "Les Revenants," the returned are given the precious gift to re-learn what it means to be human— to feel hunger, to desire another, to feel a coursing kind of fear, to love resiliently, and relentlessly. Dip your toe in its cool water and you may feel like you're learning how to be human, too.