

SHAUN OF THE DEAD

A Rogue Pictures Release

Production Notes

SHAUN OF THE DEAD

Synopsis

Already a smash hit in the U.K., *Shaun of the Dead*, a “rom zom com” (romantic zombie comedy), follows the bloody funny adventures of underachiever Shaun (Simon Pegg) and his best mate Ed (Nick Frost) as they cope with a zombie invasion of North London and attempt to rescue Shaun’s girlfriend Liz (Kate Ashfield) and his Mum, Barbara (Penelope Wilton). It’s going to be one hell of a weekend.

On Friday, Shaun is in a rut. At 29, he’s coasted through life – and still hasn’t gotten very far, usually winding up at the local pub, the Winchester. His roommate Ed looks up to him – when he can take his eyes off the TV, that is. Liz is re-evaluating their relationship, particularly after Shaun fails to do something special for their anniversary on Saturday.

That day, there are train delays, people fainting in the streets, TV news reports of unexplained calamities – and did that homeless man just try to eat a...? No, it can’t be...But, it *is* – the dead have risen. Saturday’s isolated incidents mushroom into a full-on zombie assault and, once daylight breaks, it’s Sunday bloody Sunday. As manners and flesh take a beating, it’s time to separate men from

meat, humans from zombies, and living from undead. Shaun and Ed grab whatever is at hand (cricket bat, shovel, LP) to repel the attacking zombies, summoning reserves of strength they didn't know they possessed and straining muscles they forgot they had. Rounding up friends and family, they press on towards the sanctuary of the Winchester. All that stands (or lopes) in their way are hordes of the flesh-eating undead...

Rogue Pictures and Working Title Films present a WT² Production in association with Big Talk Productions. ***Shaun of the Dead***. Simon Pegg, Kate Ashfield, Lucy Davis, Nick Frost, Dylan Moran, Bill Nighy, Penelope Wilton, Jessica Stevenson. Original Score by Daniel Mudford & Pete Woodhead. Line Producer, Ronald Vasconcellos. Costume Designer, Annie Hardinge. Hair & Make-up Designer, Jane Walker. Editor, Chris Dickens. Production Designer, Marcus Rowland. Director of Photography, David M. Dunlap. Executive Producers, Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Natascha Wharton. Executive Producers, James Wilson, Alison Owen. Written by Simon Pegg and Edgar Wright. Produced by Nira Park. Directed by Edgar Wright. A Rogue Pictures Release.

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About the Production

In 1999, the U.K.'s Channel 4 broadcast the first series of *Spaced*, a sitcom about slacker twentysomethings in North London that garnered critical acclaim, several awards, and an international cult following. The director of the show was Edgar Wright, its co-writer and star was Simon Pegg, and its producer was Nira Park.

One notable episode featured Simon's character trapped in the game "Resident Evil 2" and fighting off zombies. Simon and Edgar enjoyed doing the episode so much that they hit on the idea of making a full-length zombie feature film. Edgar enthuses, "We're both massive fans of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* [1978]. One sequence in the episode had Simon fighting off zombies with a shotgun. During filming, we looked at each other and said, 'Oh, we should really do something like this!'

"While the jumping-off point was *Spaced*, in terms of the sensibility and the humor, ***Shaun of the Dead*** encompasses a larger world. There are darker elements."

Simon explains, "We never wanted to make the film into a spoof. We wanted to be true and faithful to the genre. Horror is generally the domain of 16-to-35-year-old males, but we wanted to make a film that had broader appeal. This is a

visceral and scary zombie movie – with comedy coming from the characters and the dialogue.”

Edgar adds, “We’re crossbreeding the zombified existence of late-twentysomethings with a full-scale zombie invasion. Violent things happen, with people dying, and the black comedy comes from the characters’ responses to the mayhem. The central joke is the much-vaunted English reserve and how little that changes, even in the face of a crisis. In a lot of horror films, the script calls for all hell to break loose and people just go ‘AAAAGGGHHHH!’ In ***Shaun of the Dead***, we take a much more deadpan – if you will – route.”

However, as Simon points out, “The zombies themselves are not humorous. They’re not figures of fun; they’re a serious, malevolent presence.”

After making the second series of *Spaced*, the pair began working on a script in 2001, with Nira on board to produce. Simon remarks, “Both Edgar and I write from a very truthful perspective. We always try and draw on reality, because that’s where a convincing story or character will come from.”

Edgar agrees, noting, "We put a lot of work into getting the character stuff right and making you actually care about them."

As with *Spaced*, the setting for the film is North London. Edgar explains, "It never entirely comes off when British films try to ape American ones in pretending that London is as dangerous and action-packed as New York. So, rather than to do the touristy thing of filming in Piccadilly Circus or with red double-deckers, we wanted a very mundane suburban backdrop. Our zombie invasion is of New Barnet and Crouch End, which we are showcasing in widescreen."

From early on, Edgar, Simon, and Nira had very specific ideas as to who should play each character. To enhance the honesty of the portrayals, the actors were invited to contribute to the development of their characters, bringing as much of themselves to the role as they deemed appropriate.

Simon's take on Shaun is, "His life is very mundane yet he's almost content. He needs to commence that journey of growing up and learning to take on responsibility. His girlfriend Liz is a lot more motivated than he is, and Shaun can't really cling to apathy any more. Anything could have motivated him to get on with his life – a traffic jam, a hailstorm, a fire. It just so happens that it's a zombie invasion."

Kate Ashfield, cast as Liz, says that "Liz loves Shaun but after going out with him for a few years, she just wants things to move on; they're always going to the Winchester and they're always with Ed. She wants to do different things, go to different places, live more – and Shaun doesn't seem capable of doing that."

Spaced star Nick Frost plays Shaun's lazy and unemployed, but true-blue, friend. Nick notes, "Ed is Shaun's best mate. He came to stay at his house years before and just never left. Ed always listens to what Shaun has to say. Shaun can do what he wants, say what he wants and Ed doesn't give a s--t, doesn't judge him."

"Ed and Shaun's relationship was basically mine and Simon's relationship, for years. I would just lay on the couch while he moaned at me for being a lazy bastard. Time has passed, and I now look to that as my working towards the role of Ed. Hopefully I've made good."

Edgar adds, "That kind of on-screen chemistry between Simon and Nick as flatmates can only come from people who actually *have* lived together; we're trading on real-life chemistry. They're like brothers; there's a playful antagonism between them."

Dylan Moran, of the comedy series *Black Books*, plays David, an acquaintance with an answer for everything and a yearning for Liz. The actor was drawn to the project, as he tells it, because “they said it was a typical E. M. Forster adaptation, and that we’d get to go to Tuscany and also re-create turn-of-the-century Moscow. But all I saw was this pub.”

Of his character, Dylan confides, “David’s not very happy with who he is and what he’s doing. He’s not sure of himself. He’s very insecure, wound-up. He always has that feeling of looking over the garden wall, sure that everybody else is having a better time and that he’s been excluded.”

Lucy Davis, of the Golden Globe Award-winning television series *The Office*, plays Dianne, David’s girlfriend. Lucy sees Dianne as “lording it over other people if she gets an opportunity. Otherwise she’s kind and well-meaning. She’s eager to be helpful – and it is she who comes up with the way to escape death. She relishes this part of the day so much, when she is finally of use.”

Rounding out the cast are Simon’s *Spaced* writing partner and costar Jessica Stevenson as Yvonne, an old friend of Shaun’s; Bill Nighy, fresh from his BAFTA Award-winning role in Working Title’s *Love Actually*, as Shaun’s stuffy stepfather, Philip; and veteran actress Penelope Wilton (*Calendar Girls*) as Shaun’s kindly Mum, Barbara.

Bill says that the script impressed him because it offered “three gags on every page *and* blood everywhere. These young men know their zombie movies. I favor movies where there are specifics of human behavior. My character has difficulties with being a stepfather, and it takes a zombie attack to loosen his tongue.”

Nick reports, “The thing about Edgar is, when he’s not at work he’s like your best mate. But when it’s work, it’s business. Not that we can’t have a good laugh, but...Edgar amazes me. He’ll remember aspects of shots weeks apart, knowing that a shot’s got to come in from the left to match. His head is packed full of information; if he’d cut it open, lots of 1s and 0s would tumble out...”

Jessica says, “Edgar knows exactly what he wants to shoot before he shoots it. He does storyboards and he’s very meticulous and tenacious. Not only is he visually gifted and organized, he’s also brilliant at the comedic aspect.”

Kate marvels, “There were many people on this movie who had done lots of comedy, and they’re just so good at it. They look at the dialogue, even the set, in a different way than I normally would. They find the humor in it that I wouldn’t have necessarily seen.”

Penelope concurs, adding, "There was a wonderful family feeling; people that the team had worked with before are in the movie, friends of theirs. I was made very welcome into the group, which was lovely."

Bill admits, "I didn't know *Spaced*, but I was delighted with this script. During the shoot, I learned that fake blood congeals around your underwear, but fortunately these young men and women made Penelope and I laugh continuously."

Penelope adds, "Zombie pictures take themselves very seriously – and quite rightly so. Comedies – not so much. You don't normally get a mixture of the two. But what ***Shaun of the Dead*** is really about is the smallness of our lives. Big things happen in the world – in this case, zombies taking over – but your little world doesn't change. You still have to deal with your parents, or your girlfriend."

Edgar says admiringly, "I think Bill and Penelope enjoyed really giving performances amidst all the carnage. Although this is a comedy, their roles are comparatively dramatic."

The zombies were cast from an open-auditions call in London. Nira notes, "Edgar insisted that we have auditions for zombies, which we did in pre-production. It just grew and grew. We had extras from the agencies, and then we decided we'd accommodate the hundreds of fans who had been writing to us on the *Spaced* website asking to be zombies in the film. It was like *Pop Idol* [the U.K. precursor to *American Idol*] with all these people auditioning; we sat there as a panel and we'd get them all to do the zombie walk and a few bites, photograph them, and choose our zombies."

Ultimately, Edgar notes, "We had a mixture of actors, specialist extras, stunt people, circus performers, and amputees – there is a whole group of amputee stunt men. We re-created something I always loved in *Dawn of the Dead*: naturalistic-looking zombies. That is, even though their make-up is very basic, when dozens or hundreds of people are acting like zombies en masse it has a hypnotic effect. It's almost like it's choreographed."

In fact, choreographer Litza Bixler worked with actors and extras to ensure that their physical movements were entirely in keeping with Edgar's vision. Nira states, "Every single person – or, zombie – on-screen had to go through movement coaching."

Once costume designer Annie Hardinge and her team had dressed the undead in muted shades of grays and blues, the zombie army *really* got into character on the set.

Several times during shooting, it was difficult to hear the principal actors delivering their lines above the moaning and groaning emanating from the zombies. "They moan a *lot*; they're all very dissatisfied as a group," says Dylan.

Kate remembers, "When there were just three zombies, they were a little self-conscious. But when there were so many, when 'Action!' was called, and they *all* moaned and groaned..."

"One day, the sound people asked, 'Can all the zombies stop moaning while we record the sound of the actors, please.' We did the scene again, and there was more moaning. Again they asked, 'Can you all stop moaning when we record the scene.' We did it again, and there was still moaning. They figured out which zombie was still moaning; the guy didn't even realize he was still doing that, because he was so into it as soon as they said 'Action!'"

Nira marvels, "We ended up with 1,011 extras and probably about 800 zombies. Of the zombies, I'd say at least 70% are fans of *Spaced* or zombie films."

Indeed, the mandate for the zombie hordes was to hew closely to the portrayals in George Romero's seminal zombie trilogy (*Night of the Living Dead* [1968], *Dawn of the Dead*, and *Day of the Dead* [1985]), which Edgar and Simon acknowledge as their prime inspiration. (In addition to the title, there are other tips of the hat, such as the name of the electrical goods store where Shaun works.)

Bill comments, "Simon and Edgar know everything there is to know about zombies, like the fact that you can only kill a zombie from the neck up. You can do whatever you want to the rest of him, but that isn't going to make any difference."

Jessica adds, "Whatever you do, don't get bitten. You can get zombified if you are bitten. Zombies are the living dead and live for five years at a time; then they finally die."

Per Simon, here is what every human needs to know when caught in a close encounter with the undead: "The first thing you should do, if you see a zombie, is just run! Don't ever engage with it; just get out of its way. If there's only one or two of them, you'd be fine for quite a while – just continually walking ahead of them because they're loping and slow."

"If you do have to engage them, it's all about destroying the brain. They go on motorized instinct, driven by one little blob in the nervous system. So you've got to get to that. If you cut off the head, it remains alive, lying on the floor,

gumming for you – if the head gets ahold of your toe, you're in trouble. The best thing you can do is to smash them in the head. Take them out."

Dylan muses, "With werewolves, it's silver bullets. With Dracula, it's garlic. But with zombies...? Something like paprika and mahogany...?"

In lieu of any traditional or sanctioned zombie repellent, Nick offers these zombie-disabling tips: "You've *got* to destroy the brain. A gun works, but you'll need to reload eventually. You never have to reload a sword or a sharpened pool cue."

Lucy adds, "We don't call them 'weapons,' we just call them 'blunt objects.' Why, I don't know."

Simon clarifies that "Shaun has this slight hesitation [about offing zombies]. Even though these are zombies, he's still bashing someone's head in with a cricket bat, which he simply hasn't done before. He doesn't relish it like Ed does."

Nick explains, "Ed loves playing video games, so this is an extension of that for him; he can't believe his luck. He also doesn't initially realize how very serious it all is."

Shaun of the Dead shot for four weeks at Ealing Studios (the U.K.'s legendary filming soundstages that have hosted many classic British comedies) and for five weeks on location in London. But the tale unfolds over a weekend, so lighting and weather conditions had to be kept consistent -- which, as any U.K. resident can tell you, is rare. Night shooting on location during the summer with only a few hours of darkness also proved to be a challenge.

The residential London locations which hosted the production included Highgate, Crouch End, and New Barnet (in North London) and Millwall (in South London). Local interest was massive. There were complaints from some citizens about neighborhood children seeing hordes of ghoulish zombies. But it was clearly playtime on a grand scale; many stopped to enjoy the spectacle, watch the filming, or even join the staged fracas by suiting up as zombies for a day.

At Ealing Studios (in West London), production designer Marcus Rowland and his team crafted the inviting interior of the Winchester Pub, as well as Shaun and Ed's homey but messy flat.

In post-production two more *Spaced* collaborators, composers Daniel Mudford and Pete Woodhead, returned to the fold. They utilized custom-built instrumentation to create a sonic palette that encompasses the Endangered

Guitar and Ring Modulator, a Glass Harmonica, antique synthesizers, and percussion instruments. The resulting score is dark and eerie, yet energetic.

Shaun of the Dead world-premiered in the U.K. in April 2004 to strong critical response and boxoffice success, taking in more money there than the recent U.K. zombie hit *28 Days Later* as well as the 2004 U.S. remake of *Dawn of the Dead*.

Summing up the film's appeal to audiences, Nick notes, "There's comedy; if you don't like comedy, there's the undead; if you don't like the undead, there's Kate Ashfield...The film says that while the world may be collapsing, you still have to continue and address your relationships."

Simon states, "I think we've accomplished the film we set out to make. A lot of love and care went into ***Shaun of the Dead***, it's not an exploitation movie and it's not 'just' a horror film. Edgar and I worked a lot of detail into the writing, themes that recur and phrases that repeat. So it's a little stylized, and hopefully film buffs will enjoy it on that level. Horror fans will be sated seeing heads get blown off and zombies get stuck on spikes. And, not to be left out, couples will like it – it's a big date movie..."