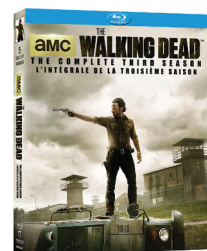
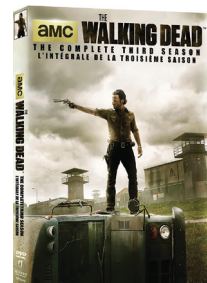


Deadheads

Living With *The Walking Dead*

by EMILY TRACE

IF SOMEONE ASKED YOU “What’s *The Walking Dead* about?” you might return the question by asking them if the rock they live under is nice this time of year, and then offhandedly respond that it’s about zombies. However, whatever the title may imply, the horror-drama based on the popular graphic novel of the same name is much more about life than it is about death. Many viewers started watching when the show premiered in 2010 because they quite understand-



AMC’s *The Walking Dead: Season Three*, available on DVD, Blu-ray and Limited Edition Blu-ray “Zombie Head Tank” August 27th from Anchor Bay

ably wanted to see some screaming suburbanites get swarmed by the living dead, but stuck with it through to the third season’s finale because of the relentlessly compelling ordeals and issues that the survivors go through... issues which are eerily familiar even to us pre-apocalyptic types. Though it might seem ironic at first that a show about the undead is so concerned with what it means to be alive, the show’s exploration of humanity accounts for its record-breaking success as much as its Emmy-award winning prosthetics department does.

With the release of *The Walking Dead*’s complete third season on DVD and Blu-ray this August 27, fans will either revisit or discover anew what makes this show unique. Of all the zombie material produced since the genre began, *Dead* is perhaps the piece that most realistically illustrates what the first world would be like if this contagion were real, because rather than trying to show an entire nation responding to the threat, the audience sees it as they would actually experience it: through the eyes of an individual or small group cut off from anything beyond their own sightlines. The only answers that the characters ever get are ones they have to venture out into the dangerous world to find; no one can Google “home zombie-bite remedy”, or look up a map showing the quickest way to resources. This isolation turns the group of survivors into a microcosm of the larger social chaos going on across the country, and one that we can immerse completely in.

Andrew Lincoln has the daunting task of taking this concentration one step further by playing police officer Rick Grimes, a reluctant leader in whose character one can see thousands of years of cultural evolution

struggle to remain intact, but slowly regress under the demands of survival. The second season witnessed this visceral arc as Rick is forced to re-evaluate what it means to be an effective leader once the world is no longer compatible with his moral code; his judgment is further complicated by his former partner, Shane, becoming a progressively more extreme example of the ruthlessness this dark world sometimes requires. It’s not easy to remain your own shoulder angel when the entire world and your best friend have become the proverbial devil luring you away from moral integrity. Coping with an injured son, an unfaithful wife, and a group that simultaneously demands and undermines his leadership, the audience can see Rick trading his moral precepts bit-by-bit for harsh, survivalist logic.

However, none of these experiences are exclusive to a world overrun by zombies; who doesn’t fear for their children, sometimes wonder about their spouse, or deal with maddening co-workers on a daily basis? Though the characters inhabit a world few can relate to, their struggles are unsettlingly relatable. And once the question of personhood is raised, *The Walking Dead* starts hitting us where it’s most personal, most uncomfortable: if you saw someone you loved change into a monster trying to rip you apart, could you pull the trigger? With Rick and Shane showing the transition away from old-world morals, the character of Hershel Greene brings something fresh to the mix, posing that “walkers” are just sick, and aren’t responsible for their actions. Insisting that he can treat them, and unwilling to shoot his own infected loved ones, the barn filled with walkers becomes a test of everyone’s humanity, empathy, and will to survive.

In the season about to be released, those themes are even more gut-wrenchingly confronted as we get into the actual science behind the epidemic, and into something even darker than living death. According to the Governor, a central new character, the world may have changed but the way people think has not. Enough time has passed in this universe that many of the uninfected have become more monstrous than the walkers they defend themselves from. At this point, everyone has put a steel pipe through a walker’s eye more times than they can count; some of the characters barely pay attention as they swing an axe into what used to be a human skull. The real threat at this point are the people who either let the cruelty of the new world change them, or only had their cruelty held back by civilization and are now free to indulge. After one of the most harrowing scenes the show has staged yet, Maggie remarks “All this time running from walkers—you forget what people do.”

We know zombies like to eat people; it’s not personal. But humanity’s savagery proves to be far more grisly as the third season takes us to the two parallel societies created by survivors. The first is a prison that once kept dangerous criminals away from civilians, and is now where Rick and his group barricade themselves to keep the danger out. It is in their cellblock where a side character observes what may be the thesis of the whole season: “Only getting worse out there. Dead



everywhere. Only making the living less like the living.” And nowhere is this more apparent than in the second society we discover: the disturbingly peaceful town of Woodbury. As its conspicuously generic name might suggest, this Stepford-esque community seems blithely unafraid of the threat outside their walls, though said walls seem to be made mostly out of old tires and corrugated metal.

Woodbury’s horror is more vicious because it lulls one into a rare sense of security with its clean sidewalks and grocery-shopping citizens. In a world where you get used to danger lunging at you rotting, growling, and biting, the more insidious dangers can be hard to detect—unless you’re katana-wielding Michonne, the third season’s breakout star. Immediately more on her guard in the deceptively safe town than she is surrounded by walkers in the wilderness, the term “strong female character” really doesn’t cover it. An enigma who shows up with two armless walkers on leashes, Michonne has in-

stincts as sharp as her sword and she trusts them, comparable only to fan-favourite Daryl Dixon. Her importance to the narrative becomes clear when she sees right through Woodbury’s too-smooth Governor, and hightails it ages before the town’s nauseating theatrics begin to surface. After witnessing their customs and fighting his way out of the town, Rick asks, “What kind of a sick mind does that?” and Hershel answers, “The kind this world creates.”

Though the walkers are easily the most thrilling and expensive part of the show, *The Walking Dead* is indisputably about life; the right to life, the defence of life, and the bravery and brutality that the living are capable of. With moments of crippling grief, salacious gore and startling humour, *The Walking Dead* makes it all too easy to imagine an apocalyptic world, but poses a difficult question to viewers, especially fans who say a zombie apocalypse would be fun, challenging us to honestly question who such a world would make us become.