

# MONTHLY MOVIES

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## Haunting yet fun films for Halloween

*By T. Rob Brown*

Like me, I bet most of you have a group of films that feed your horror cravings as September creeps into October. Rather than talk about what you might expect—Freddy, Jason, Chucky, Candyman, Leatherface, Ghost Face, or any other series of slasher and nightmare films—I’m going to focus on films that share both my love of the fantastical and gothic horrors to the comedic horrors that keep reminding us that Halloween is one of the most fun holidays.

When we think about classic horror, we often think of H.P. Lovecraft, Bram Stoker or the dark poetry of Edgar Allan Poe. In more modern times, Stephen King’s name jumps right out on top with the likes of Dean Koontz, Clive Barker and Anne Rice nipping at his heels.

For my cinema and streaming dollars, the horror experts I turn to include the likes of Sam Raimi, Guillermo del Toro, Tim Burton, John Carpenter and a handful of others to a lesser degree. Here’s my personal must-watch Halloween movies ...

Let’s begin by looking at the highlights of Raimi’s career. You might know him as that guy who directed the Toby Maguire Spider-Man trilogy of films for Sony Pictures. You might even know he’s directing the upcoming “Doctor Strange and the Multiverse of Madness” film for the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Choosing Raimi to lead Marvel’s first MCU venture into the horror genre was not by accident for Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige.

Raimi’s career is a long one that began with a foundation in the horror genre. During his college years, he and his brothers Ivan and Ted Raimi made friends with a couple guys named Bruce Campbell

and Rob Tapert. Campbell showed talent to be a leading man and Tapert focused his skills behind the scenes. Together, this quintet would make their first film during college—a film that would help redefine the horror genre—“The Evil Dead.” Rightly so, it released on Oct. 15, 1981, and grabbed the Saturn Award for Best Low-Budget Film.

This was the film that launched a career for the quintet that would span a trilogy and a more-recent spin-off TV series. The sequels “Evil Dead 2: Dead By Dawn” (1987) and “Army of Darkness” (1993) led to “Ash vs. Evil Dead” (2015-2018). The latter lasted a few seasons on Starz and saw Campbell return to his eponymous role as Ashley “Ash” J. Williams.

In that first film, Campbell took on the starring role as brothers Ivan and Ted Raimi were fake Shemps, or people who appear in a film as a replacement for another actor for certain scenes—usually involving stunts or just their back. That term originated from Shemp Howard of the Three Stooges. By the second film, Ted Raimi took on the role of possessed Henrietta and he had additional roles in “Army of Darkness.”

Meanwhile, Tapert stepped into the producer role as a couple other members of the Tapert family helped out as fake Shemps. Joseph LoDuca created the musical scores for most of the films. Composer Danny Elfman stepped in for “Army of Darkness” to create the “March of the Dead” piece. This relationship would later lead to Elfman working with Raimi again on “Darkman” and the Spider-Man trilogy.

The story focuses on a group of five college students who take a break for the weekend to go to a creepy cabin deep in the woods. They discover a sinister book, seemingly clutched from H.P. Lovecraft’s own grip, called the Necronomicon—an ancient Sumerian text stitched from human flesh and scrawled in blood. The book awakens an unseen force that pursues them and threatens to corrupt or end them.

Because we never see this demonic force—Raimi wisely chose to use a POV, or point-of-view, shot—it makes this unknown entity seem even more powerful and foreboding. We just see characters flee as it hunts them down.

One of the more brilliant character actors out there and the oft-proclaimed B-movie king, Campbell pops up in all kinds of films and TV shows, with recurring roles on “Hercules the Legendary Journeys,” “Xena: Warrior Princess,” “Burn Notice,” and so many more. He even had cameo roles in all three Raimi Spider-Man films. Ultimately, though, he’s known for portraying Ash in the Evil Dead series.

“The Evil Dead,” a college film later rated NC-17, received a 7.5/10 International Movie Database rating, a Certified Fresh Tomatometer 95% rating and an 84% audience score. It runs 1 hour and 25 minutes. “Evil Dead 2: Dead By Dawn,” rated R, received a 7.7/10 imdb.com rating, a Certified Fresh Tomatometer 95% rating and an 89% audience score. It runs 1 hour and 25 minutes. “Army of Darkness,” rated R, received a 7.5/10 imdb.com rating, 73% on the Tomatometer and an 87% audience score. It runs 1 hour and 21 minutes.

“Ash vs. Evil Dead” received an 8.4/10 imdb.com rating but rests on the high end of Rotten Tomatoes with a 99% Tomatometer and a 95% average audience score. If you’re an “Army of Darkness” fan, don’t miss out on the TV series that picks up 30 years after the end of the film trilogy. It’s filled with

all the Ash goodness, scares, humor and creepy undead that you've come to expect from Raimi and crew.

Director Guillermo del Toro, born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, began a career in his country that would eventually lead to Hollywood. A brilliant storyteller, del Toro is often recognized for his action stories like "Pacific Rim" (2013) and comic book-based films like Dark Horse Comics' "Hellboy" (2004), Marvel's "Blade II" (2002) and "Hellboy II: The Golden Army" (2008) or the romance story that seems to pay homage to the horror classic "The Creature from the Black Lagoon" (1954), while creating its own unique and intriguing story in "The Shape of Water" (2017).

Beyond that, his biggest strength lies in his ability to create some of the most unique and horrifying creatures in all of Hollywood—a talent that certainly helped in the creation of all of those works. But for me, "Pan's Labyrinth" (2006) is such a beautiful yet haunting piece of work that treads the line between fantasy and reality. This is his work I most appreciate around Halloween.

The story takes place in Spain in 1944. Del Toro weaves a wonderful story that fascinates and keeps you on the edge of your seat. All the way up until the end of the film you question what is real and what is fantasy. The creatures in this film are absolutely fascinating and unique. I know the creepy creature with the eyeballs on its hands sent shivers down my spine.

"Pan's Labyrinth," rated R, received an 8.2/10 imdb.com rating, a Certified Fresh 95% on the Tomatometer and a 91% audience score. It runs 2 hours.

Another one of his I enjoy, but to a lesser degree, is "Crimson Peak" (2015), rated R, which received a 6.5/10 imdb.com rating, a 72% on the Tomatometer and a 55% audience score. It runs 1 hour and 59 minutes. I'm not sure what's up with that low audience score—maybe they didn't understand the film? It has a twist in terms of the ghosts and maybe that confused some of the audience but I thought it was rather original and interesting.

You can't hardly talk about Raimi without also talking about Burton. While each has their own distinct style, they're certainly closer to one another than any other director is to each of them—in the same way that Jerry Bruckheimer and Michael "Boom" Bay are closer in style to one another than they are to any other directors.

In addition to their personal creepy style films and affinity for the undead in their storytelling, Raimi and Burton even share a preference for Elfman as their musical storyteller. I would describe Elfman's scores as spooky but yet a bit kooky—a bit lighthearted, if you will. This reminds me of how George Lucas and Steven Spielberg—who were both friends as student filmmakers—share a preference for John Williams as their musical storyteller.

Burton might have one of the largest lists of fun horror films as a director and/or producer: "Edward Scissorhands" (1990), "Corpse Bride" (2005), "Frankenweenie" (2012), "Nightmare Before Christmas" (1993) and "Dark Shadows" (2012). Little-known fact: Burton did not direct "The Nightmare Before Christmas" but it was based on his original artwork he created long before, when he worked for the Walt Disney Company, before launching his film career with 1985's "Pee-Wee's Big Adventure."

"Nightmare Before Christmas" filmed at the same time while Burton was filming "Batman Returns." Due to his contractual obligation to Warner Brothers for the Batman franchise, he passed the

Disney film's directorial duties to Henry Selick. Burton had little involvement other than sketching the characters and providing brief summaries of their story plots, according to the Netflix series "The Holiday Movies That Made Us" (2020).

As a bonus, "Nightmare Before Christmas" is one of those movies we can watch from Halloween all the way until the end of the year and it stays in season.

What I really want to watch in terms of Burton and spooky holiday films includes three specific titles: "Beetlejuice" (1988), "Sleepy Hollow" (1999) and "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street" (2007). "Beetlejuice" was one of the first comedic horror films I recall from my teen years—along with 1984's "Ghostbusters." Back then, that sub-genre of horror was harder to find. I mean, sure, we had "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes" (1978) when I was a little kid but it was hard to take that film seriously at all.

"Beetlejuice," on the other hand, was a tour de force of spooky comedy—not unlike "Ghostbusters" in that respect. But of the two, "Beetlejuice" was far more creepy, as one would expect from the mind of Burton. Sure, the wacky incarnations of Beetlejuice as a snake or as a fly are pretty creepy but the creepiness really sets in when the at-least 600-year-old Beetlejuice tries to force a marriage with Lydia Deetz, played by a 15-year-old Winona Ryder. "It's been about 600 years," he tells her. I think this just furthers the very irreverent nature of Beetlejuice's character.

That aside, Burton put together an all-star cast with Michael Keaton who really steals the show as the title character, Alec Baldwin, Geena Davis, Catherine O'Hara, Jeffrey Jones and discovering young Ryder—who would later be in the spooky "Stranger Things" on Netflix.

"Beetlejuice," rated PG, received a 7.5/10 imdb.com score and a Certified Fresh 85% Tomatometer and an 82% audience score. It runs 1 hour and 32 minutes.

My personal favorite in the Burton repertoire, for Halloween, is "Sleepy Hollow."

Teaming up for the umpteenth time, Burton places expert character actor Johnny Depp in the lead role as Constable Ichabod Crane. He's joined by Christina Ricci as Katrina Anne Van Tassel as they try to decipher a series of murderous clues related to a mysterious Headless Horseman.

Fun trivia fact: Most of the Sith lord actors from the Star Wars prequels make an appearance in this film—Ray Park (Darth Maul) plays the Headless Horseman for stunt work, Ian McDiarmid (Darth Sidious/Emperor Palpatine) plays Dr. Thomas Lancaster and Christopher Lee (Darth Tyrannus/Count Dooku) plays the Magistrate. Even Michael Gambon (Albus Dumbledore from the Harry Potter franchise) plays Baltus Van Tassel. That's a whole lot of wizards.

"Sleepy Hollow," rated R, received a 7.3/10 imdb.com score and a 69% Tomatometer and 80% audience score. It runs 1 hour and 45 minutes.

The final roundup—or other movies I would have loved to include and I highly recommend: "Alien" (1979) by Ridley Scott, "The Crow" (1994) and "Dark City" (1998) by Alex Proyas, "Bram Stoker's Dracula" (1992) by Francis Ford Coppola, "From Dusk Till Dawn" (1996) by Robert Rodriguez, "Get Out" (2017) by Jordan Peele, "Gremlins" (1984), Anne Rice's "Interview with the Vampire" (1994), "The Lost Boys," (1987), "Pitch Black" (2000), "Shaun of the Dead" (2004) by Edgar Wright, "The Thing" (1982) by

John Carpenter, "Tucker and Dale vs. Evil" (2011), "Zombieland" (2009) and "Zombieland: Double Tap" (2019).

"The show must go on."