



Pontypool

MARCH'S MONSTER MASH

The video store shelves are dripping with diabolical DVD releases. Some are even good...

APART FROM THE FACT THEY ALL FALL UNDER THE broad label "horror", there's precious little linkage between this month's genre releases – apart, that is, from an indie ethos and the desire to scare us.

While dwindling in comparison with the past few years, the zombie is hanging in there as the monster *du jour*, with two March offerings propagating the undead ethos. Most remarkable is the 2008 film from Canadian filmmaker Bruce McDonald, *Pontypool* (Rent, Mar 10, MA15+), which sees a small town overtaken by a cannibalistic virus that spreads through the English language. A cowboy shock-jock holed up in his radio station attempts to get a stranglehold on the mayhem, but little does he know he's functioning as a conduit for the disease. As someone announces, "There's a monster loose and it's bouncing through our language." *Pontypool* does justice to its strong concept, almost poetically, with language that mutates from pithy dialogue to precise mumbo-jumbo – the mumbo-jumbo being an indicator of infection. Similar to Oliver Stone's *Talk Radio*, the action captured by a constantly revolving camera remains tightly confined within the radio station, with much of the actual horror

occurring through suggestion and rhetoric. When those bloody moments happen, they do so with considerable impact given their on-screen scarcity. And it's a very clever film that can build to a genuinely nail-biting climax where the characters throw nothing except words at each other. Great, screwy stuff.

★★★★

Taking another swipe at zombie-ism is 2006's New York underground feature *Mulberry St* (Rent/Buy, Mar 4, MA15+), which uses the popular notion of the city's sewers as incubator for disease. An insidious contagion rises up to street level where it passes from rats to humans, creating a kind of zombie-rodent breed. Indie filmmaker



Mulberry St



Swarmed



*Vampire Girl Vs
Frankenstein Girl*



Jim Mickle drew on the favours of friends to get this flick together, including writer Nick Damici doubling as one of the leads. While his effort to produce a serious and emotionally engaging horror movie is well-intentioned and, at times, successful, he fails to deliver anything new – even the jumpy shaky-cam action scenes now feel long past their used-by date. ★★☆☆

A more mainstream and bigger-budget entry is the long-shelved, 2009-released *Case 39* (Rent/Buy, Mar 11, MA15+), directed by German filmmaker Christian Alvart. This stars – drum roll – Oscar-winner Renée Zellweger, who approaches her role with her usual standard of virtuosity, and Ian McShane (*Deadwood*), although his immense talent is under-utilised here. A Hollywood-styled venture into the horror genre, *Case 39* commences as though it's a James Patterson thriller (think *Kiss The Girls*), and then goes... somewhere else. In fact, for the first 30 minutes, the horror label seems entirely inappropriate. Zellweger plays an overly compassionate social worker investigating

ZOMBIES, DOPPELGANGERS, EVIL KIDS, KILLER WASPS AND KE-RAZY JAPANESE MONSTER GIRLS.

an alleged incident of child abuse involving a 10-year-old girl. It's best to leave any further description at that, as the plot is far more compelling when unfolding as a mystery. Solid within a familiar commercial mould. ★★★☆☆

British filmmaker Sean Ellis makes the leap from sci-fi *Cashback* to mainstream horror with 2008's *The Broken* (Rent/Buy, Mar 3, TBC). Slick and stylish, this is almost a little too poised, with an austere lead in Lena Headey (*300*). She's a radiologist who questions her faculties after she follows a doppelganger of herself to an apartment. In the ensuing confusion, she has a car accident – a lovely slo-mo sequence, by the way – which then puts her mental state in further doubt. Given the precedence of style-over-substance, there are still some genuinely scary sequences, although a number of "boo" red-herring moments prove annoying.

A worthy effort, regardless. ★★★☆☆

Unfortunately, 2005's made-for-TV buzzkill *Swarmed* (Rent, Mar 3, M) possesses virtually zero redeeming qualities. Drawing from a long lineage of nature-gone-wrong monster movies, it does nothing but perch lazily on the reputation of those who've preceded it. (It makes you wonder how films such as this secure distribution when far superior examples, such as Kyle Rankin's *Infestation*, rot in local release purgatory.) The set-up of a genetically altered swarm of yellow-jacket wasps who wing into a hicksville town on the day of their big BBQ cook-off (feel that tension!) plays out seriously rather than for laughs, intended or otherwise. Thanks to unscary wasps, no drama and no thrills, the result is simply boring. ★☆☆☆☆

Vampire Girl Vs Frankenstein Girl (Rent/Buy, Mar 10, MA15+) is as kooky as its title. This Japanese-produced feature pitches itself at a head-scratching level of craziness, and any minor sanity therein is most likely lost in translation. The comedy-horror element of the film is established in the opening sequence with fountains of blood and corny, unrealistic SFX, and then further cemented with scenes such as a "wrist-cut rally" where one participant claims, "I will be Christ in the wrist-cut world". The plot involves a teenage vampire hoping to secure the love of a schoolboy through blood-filled chocolates, although the pushy daughter of the vice-principal has already staked her claim. It all explodes in something resembling an '80s music video with a whole lot of Japanese Cyndi Laupers. For hardcore devotees of Japanese curios only. ★☆☆☆☆

EMMA WESTWOOD



Case 39



The Broken