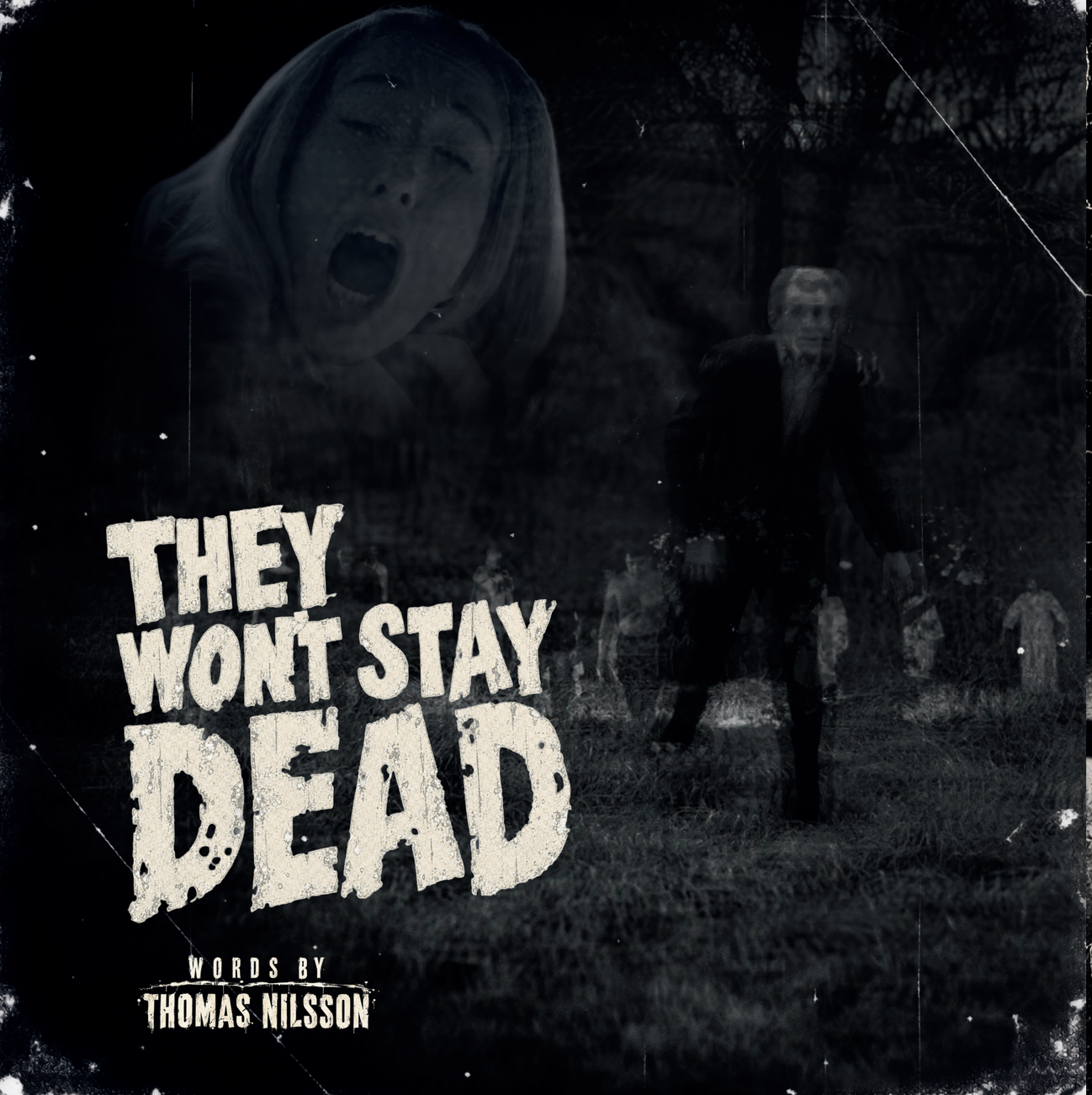
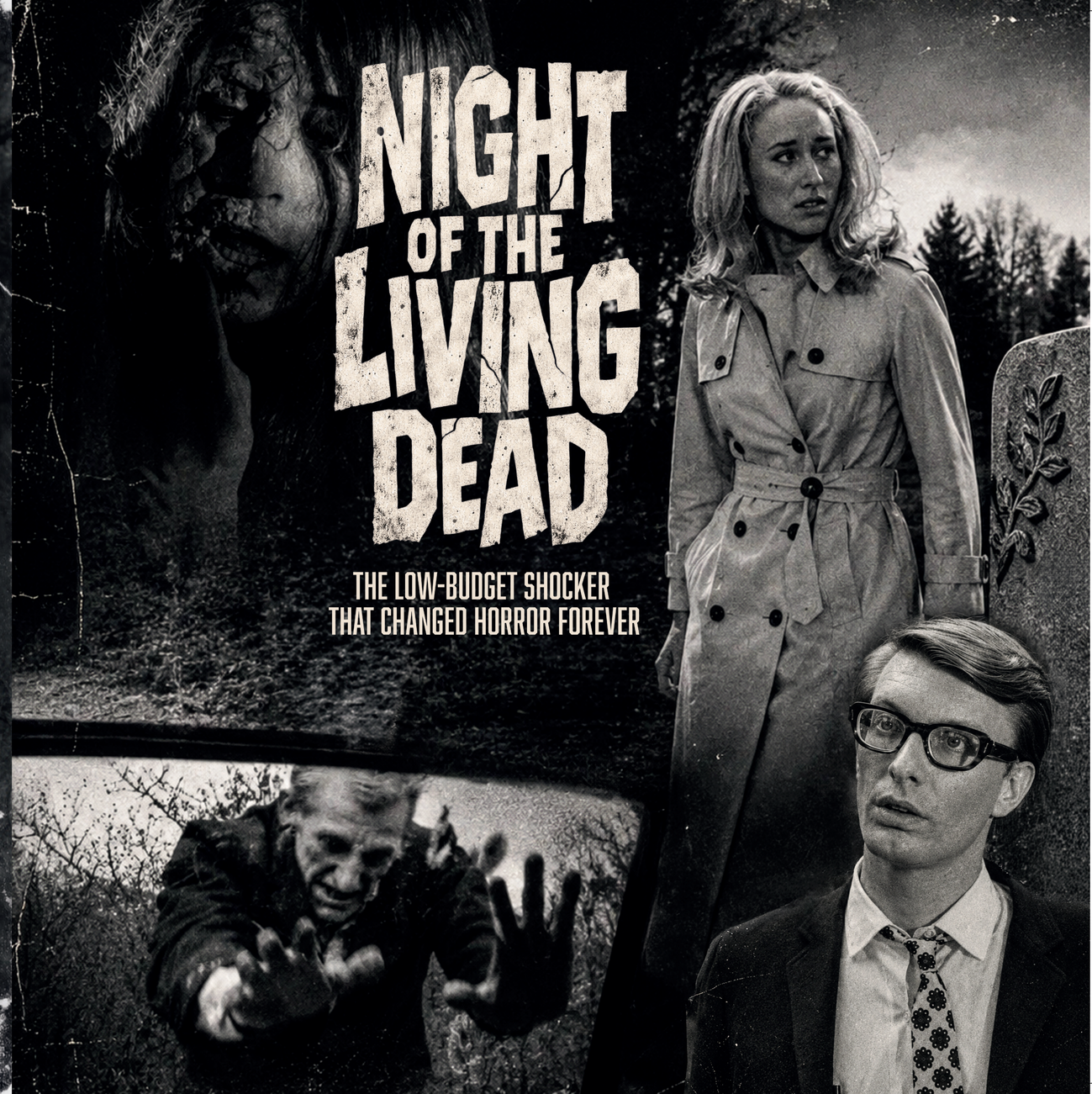

THEY WONT STAY DEAD
WORDS BY
THOMAS NILSSON


NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD
THE LOW-BUDGET SHOCKER
THAT CHANGED HORROR FOREVER

THE $114,000 NIGHTMARE

Night of the Living Dead was filmed outside Pittsburgh and directed, shot, and edited by **George A. Romero**, who had previously only made commercials. He also co-wrote the script with **John Russo**. The film cost around $114,000 to make and grossed a total of $15 million in the US alone, and $30 million worldwide. In Europe, it was the most-watched film of 1968. Today it's regarded as one of the most profitable low-budget films ever made.

With revenue exceeding its budget 263 times over, the box-office success was undeniable — even though the film was controversial and widely criticized at its premiere for its violent, bloody content.

Romero's lack of experience and knowledge of how the film industry worked meant he was cheated on the distribution deal and barely made any money himself from the film's success.

Today, Night of the Living Dead has achieved cult status and is considered a classic that permanently changed the horror genre. It is now hailed as the very first modern zombie film, even though the word "zombie" is never spoken in the film. Reader's Digest ranks it as the twelfth scariest horror film of all time. In 1999, it was also added to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry, having been deemed "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

THE PLOT

The opening has become iconic — siblings **Johnny** (**Russell Streiner**) and **Barbra** (**Judith O'Dea**) arrive at a desolate cemetery in Pennsylvania to visit their father's grave. It's here that Johnny teases his sister with the classic line "*They're coming to get you, Barbra*," just before they're attacked by a mysterious figure in a suit.

Johnny is killed, but Barbra manages to flee to a nearby, isolated farmhouse.Together with **Ben** (**Duane Jones**), the Cooper family with their injured daughter, and a young couple, Barbra barricades herself inside the house. During the evening, the survivors learn through radio and TV news broadcasts that a wave of cannibalistic attacks has broken out across the entire American north-east coast, where the dead have come back to life — possibly caused by radiation from a space probe that crashed after visiting Venus.

Reports also describe armed groups patrolling the countryside to kill the creatures.

As more and more of the living dead gather outside the farmhouse and try to break in, conflicts inside the house grow over how best to survive the night.

DID YOU KNOW...

...that **Night of the Living Dead** is widely regarded as the first modern zombie film, even though the word "zombie" is never spoken in the film? Director **Romero** instead called the creatures "ghouls" or "flesh eaters." It was moviegoers and critics who started calling the monsters zombies, which quickly became a pop-culture standard.

$114 000 TO MAKE

$ 30, 000, 000 AT THE BOX OFFICE

ONE OF THE MOST PROFITABLE LOW-BUDGET FILMS EVER MADE



Photo: Nicolas Genin / Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 2.0. Cropped by Andibrunt.

GEORGE A. ROMERO

THE ZOMBIE MASTER

Romero (1940–2017) became famous as "the spiritual father of the zombie film." He was born and raised in the Bronx, New York. Even as a young man he was deeply interested in film. Romero would regularly take the train into Manhattan to rent movies. His favorite was the musical ***The Tales of Hoffmann (1951)***, which he and another kid constantly took turns borrowing — that other kid was a certain **Martin Scorsese**.

Romero started out making commercials in the early 1960s. After his feature debut and the success of ***Night of the Living Dead***, he continued directing, but without major hits, with films like ***There's Always Vanilla (1971)***, ***Jack's Wife / Season of the Witch (1972)***, and ***The Crazies (1973)***. He fared better with the vampire film ***Martin (1977)***.

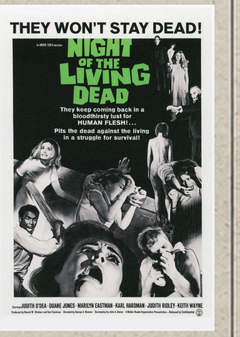
His next major success was ***Dawn of the Dead (1978)*** — the sequel to Night of the Living Dead, which became a substantial box-office hit worldwide. Romero went on to make a handful of further zombie sequels — ***Day of the Dead (1985), Land of the Dead (2005), Diary of the Dead (2007)***, and ***Survival of the Dead (2009)***.

Romero also managed to make cult classics such as ***Knightriders (1981), Creepshow (1982), Monkey Shines (1988)***, and the anthology film ***Two Evil Eyes (1990)*** together with **Dario Argento**.

The controversies

When **Night of the Living Dead** opened in American theaters on October 1, 1968, the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) age-rating system didn't yet exist.

The film screened as an ordinary afternoon matinee and drew crowds of families with children and teenagers. But audiences were completely unprepared for the raw realism and the pitch-black ending. Even though the film was shot in black and white, viewers were shocked by the bloodshed on screen, including scenes of zombies eating entrails and a child stabbing her mother to death.



Reports from the premiere described theaters filling with crying children and horrified parents walking out — something no one had experienced at the movies before. Film critic **Roger Ebert** reviewed the film for the Chicago Sun-Times and later described the icy silence that fell over the theater as the zombies attacked, and how one little girl panicked.

Outraged critics sparked a heated debate about censorship and filmmakers' moral responsibility. The trade paper Variety condemned the film as a "sadism orgy." Some of the criticism also carried racist undertones, since Night of the Living Dead is considered the first horror film with a Black lead actor.

During the 1960s, moviegoers were also used to the hero saving the day and order being restored in the final scene. That **Ben** in Night of the Living Dead dies because of carelessness and prejudice, and that his body is thrown onto a bonfire as if he were garbage, was a drastic move that shocked audiences and extinguished all hope.

The film's closing shots are presented as grainy stills resembling newspaper photographs and TV war reportage. This reinforced the sense that the film wasn't just a made-up story, but a reflection of the real violence in America at the time.

The line "Good shot! OK, he's dead; let's go get 'im. That's another one for the fire" was a deliberate nod to the broader violence of late-1960s American society — but above all to the brutal horrors of the Vietnam War, which increasingly weighed on the American public's conscience.

Romero's unconventional stroke of genius created the modern, cynical horror film, in which no one — not even the hero — is safe anymore.



THE CAST

Casting the unknown African American actor **Duane Jones (1937–1988)** in the lead role of **Ben** in 1968 — in the midst of the turbulent American civil rights movement and the assassination of **Martin Luther King** — was a historically bold move.

Romero himself has always maintained that the choice wasn't political. Jones simply got the role because he gave by far the best audition. Jones also rewrote large parts of his character himself, to make him more intellectual and decisive. But the final scene still carried enormous impact — that a strong, intelligent Black man survives an entire night of terror only to be shot in the head by a white local vigilante group the next morning, and then thrown onto a bonfire along with the bodies of the living dead, caused an uproar across the US.

Duane Jones continued acting, mainly in theater, but also appeared in films such as ***Ganja & Hess (1973)***, ***Beat Street (1984)***, and ***Vampires (1986)***.

Judith O'Dea was born and raised in Romero's hometown of Pittsburgh. At 23, she was in Los Angeles hoping to break into Hollywood when she was offered her now-iconic role as **Barbra**.

O'Dea took a career break to focus on family life, but made a comeback in 1978 with the TV film ***The Pirate***, and has since appeared in horror films such as ***Claustrophobia (2003)*** and ***October Moon (2005)***. She also appears in the horror comedy ***Vampire Zombies... From Space! (2024)***.

Russell Streiner was a producer on **Night of the Living Dead** and **George A. Romero's** business partner. He had no prior acting experience when he played **Johnny** in the film. In the end credits he's only listed as a producer. Streiner has continued producing films, including **Tom Savini's** remake of ***Night of the Living Dead (1990)***, in which he also has a small role. He also wrote the story for the cult classic ***Return of the Living Dead (1985)***.

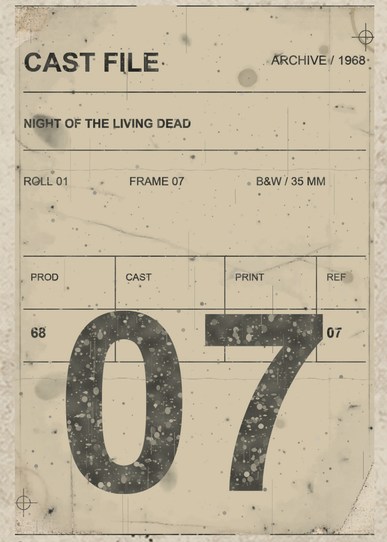
Karl Hardman plays **Harry Cooper**, one of the survivors hiding at the farmhouse Barbra manages to reach. Hardman was also one of the film's producers. He additionally mixed the sound and created the film's sound effects. Hardman's wife in the film is played by his real-life partner and collaborator **Marilyn Eastman**, who also appears as a zombie corpse in the film. The family's nine-year-old daughter is played by Karl Hardman's real-life daughter, **Kyra Schon**.

Tom is portrayed by **Ronald Keith Hartman**, known as "**Keith Wayne**." The role in Night of the Living Dead was the only one he ever played. Hartman later made his living as, among other things, a singer, dancer, musician, and nightclub owner before becoming a chiropractor. Hartman took his own life in 1995, at just 50 years old.

His girlfriend Judy in the film is played by the then-19-year-old receptionist **Judith Ridley**. She had no prior acting experience when she auditioned for the role of Barbra, but had to settle for a less demanding supporting role. She went on to appear in Romero's second film, the romantic comedy ***There's Always Vanilla (1971)***.

Bill Hinzman (1936–2012) became iconic for playing the film's first zombie — the one who attacks Johnny and Barbra in the cemetery in the opening scene. Hinzman reprised the role when new footage was shot for the film's 30th-anniversary re-release.

Hinzman appeared in several other horror films, including Romero's ***The Crazies (1973)*** and ***Knightriders (1981)***, as well as ***Legion of the Night (1995)***, ***Santa Claws (1996)***, ***River of Darkness (2011)***, and ***Zombies: Night of the Living Dead (2011)***. He also directed ***The Majorettes (1986)*** and ***Flesheater (1988)***.



THE MUSIC



It's a common misconception that the music was chosen because the film is in the public domain (freely available without copyright).

In fact, it's the exact opposite — the film became public domain by mistake, and the music was chosen because of the film's extremely low budget.

George A. Romero and his team couldn't afford to hire a composer or record an orchestra. Instead, they bought the rights to cheap, pre-recorded stock music (so-called production music or library music). Most of the music came from Capitol Production Music's "Hi-Q" library.

The pieces had originally been written by composers such as **Spencer Moore, William Loose,** and **Ib Glindemann**. They had no idea their work would end up in what would become a zombie classic — the music they created was intended for sale to various TV series, radio dramas, and B-movies.

Romero himself sat in the editing room listening through dozens of vinyl records and reels of dramatic and suspenseful music. By piecing together different tracks, he created a cohesive, eerie soundscape. Some of the same musical cues had actually been used before, including in the science-fiction film ***Teenagers from Outer Space (1959)*** and in civil information films about the threat of nuclear war — but it was in **Night of the Living Dead** that the music became famous.

Battle to the Death
(uncredited)
Music by **Harry Bluestone** and **Emil Cadkin**

Finger of Suspicion
(uncredited)
Music by **Harry Bluestone** and **Emil Cadkin**

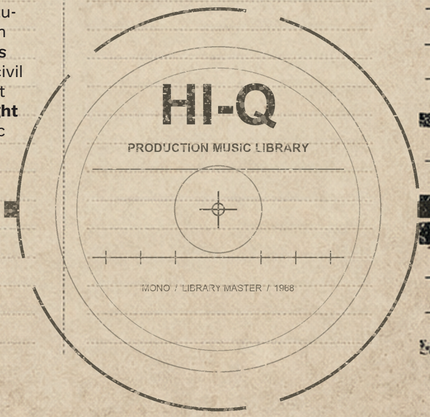
Fire (JB-28)
(uncredited)
Music by **William Loose** and **Jack Cookerly**

Eerie Heavy Echo (L-1214)
(uncredited)
Music by **Spencer Moore**

Eerie Heavy Echo (L-1204)
(uncredited)
Music by **Spencer Moore**

Eerie Heavy Echo (L-1216)
(uncredited)
Music by **Spencer Moore**

Shock/Stormy
(uncredited)
Music by **Ib Glindemann**



SCRAPBOOK OF THE DEAD



The cast lived where the dead walked

THE HOUSE THAT WAS ALREADY DOOMED

The film crew couldn't afford to rent a farm, so they had to borrow an old house slated for demolition to shoot in.

Romero, Streiner, and a few others even lived in the house during filming. Since it had no running water, they had to take care of their bathroom needs in a nearby river. The house also had no basement, so the film's basement scenes were shot in the production company's basement in downtown Pittsburgh.

NO FINAL SCRIPT — NO PROBLEM

When filming began, there was no finished script. Most of the dialogue was rewritten and improvised by the actors on the spot.

SAVINI FINALLY GOT HIS NIGHT



Makeup artist **Tom Savini** directed an updated remake in 1990.

George A. Romero wrote the screenplay. Romero had actually wanted to hire Savini for the special effects on the original **Night of the Living Dead**, but Savini was serving as a photographer in the Vietnam War at the time.

Savini got his chance in 1978, when he handled the effects on Romero's ***Dawn of the Dead*** (and even appears in the film as a biker gang member).

Savini also created the grotesque effects for ***Day of the Dead (1985)***.

THEY REALLY ATE THE FLESH

The actors in the scene where the living dead eat human remains from a burned-out truck were actually chewing on oven-roasted ham and organ meat, donated by a local butcher shop and soaked in chocolate syrup.

ZOMBIES PAID IN T-SHIRTS

The extras who played zombies received no financial compensation.

Instead, they got a T-shirt stating they had appeared in the film.

WHAT DO YOU CALL THE DEAD?

The film was shot outside Pittsburgh between July 1967 and January 1968 — under the working title **Monster Flick.** Partway through filming, the title was changed to **Night of the Anubis**, after a short story **Romero** had written as source material for the film. Once the film was finished, the plan was to release it as **Night of the Flesh Eaters**, but that had to be changed since another film with that same title had already come out in 1964.

THE ZOMBIES WERE ALMOST ALIENS

The original script that **John Russo** and **Romero** were kicking around was a sci-fi comedy about teenage aliens, before they changed their minds and decided it should be about the living dead.

Romero has admitted that he essentially based the film's entire core premise on **Richard Matheson's** 1954 novel ***I Am Legend*** (which became a film starring **Will Smith** in 2007).



BLOOD BY BOSCO

Bosco Chocolate Syrup was used as fake blood because it looked the most realistic in grayscale, since the film was shot in black and white.

THE BEGINNING CAME LAST

The film's classic opening scene was actually filmed last.



ROMERO HAD HIS EYE ON THE BALL

Romero himself put together the corpse upstairs and used ping-pong balls for eyes.

THE MISSING © THAT COST MILLIONS

The film is famous today for being in the so-called public domain? This is due to a careless mistake by the distributor.

The film was originally meant to be called **Night of the Flesh Eaters**, but when the title was changed to **Night of the Living Dead** at the last minute, the distributor forgot to place the copyright symbol (©) on the theatrical title cards. Under US law at the time, this meant the film immediately became free for anyone to screen, copy, and sell.

Romero and his team consequently lost out on millions of dollars in revenue.