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AND 60 YEARS OF STAR TREK

SFX 400

**RETURN TO
SILENT HILL**
THE GAME IS
ON AGAIN

**28 YEARS
LATER**
THE BONE TEMPLE

DAVID LYNCH
REMEMBERED

**THE LAND
THAT TIME
FORGOT**
THE '70S FILM
REVISITED

**WE BURY
THE DEAD**
DAISY RIDLEY
VS ZOMBIES

**TEENAGE
MUTANT
NINJA
TURTLES**
MAKING A
'90s CLASSIC



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Captain's Log



What can you say about 400 issues of *SFX*? Who knew that when it started back in 1995, that everything it championed would go on to become the most popular “content” in the world? Well, we always knew of course. And it’s thanks to people like you that we’re still here to celebrate a publishing milestone. So thank you, genuinely. I’m so happy that the magazine I grabbed off the shelf with issue one, 30 years ago, is still here for people like us, never mind that we still get to make it.

The truth is, I’m standing on the shoulders of giants here – many of whom either still work in our tiny team or contribute. Not only is that a privilege and an honour, it’s a testament to how much people love this magazine – everyone’s still on speaking terms and happy to pitch in!

However, it’s pretty much business as usual this issue – we spent quite a lot of our 30th anniversary year bringing you additional premium editions of the magazine, so we decided to not blow our own horns too much for the 400th edition. Well, we’ll save that for the book – and all the other things we have planned using our archive of 400 issues!

But how fitting to have a sci-fi juggernaut on the cover, also celebrating a milestone as *Star Trek* boldly goes into its 60th year.

To the journey!

Darren
X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

- *Silent Night, Deadly Night* was so good. It almost makes me festive! Almost.
- *It: Welcome To Derry* stuck the landing. Episode seven was must-see television.

400 MEMORY

- Being on the set of *Terrifier 3* was genuinely one of the best experiences of my life – the crew were so incredibly generous and New York was ace!



IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

- If you love classic posters (and seeing beautiful things being saved) I strongly recommend the @posterconservation account on Instagram. Weirdly soothing.

400 MEMORY

- There’s a lot to choose from... It’s a toss-up between my first *Doctor Who* set visit (“The Satan Pit”), or meeting George Romero for the first time in Toronto during a *Land Of The Dead* set visit.



JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

400 MEMORY

- Too many wonderful experiences to list, but sharing a dancefloor with *SFX*’s lovely readers, our amazing team and various members of sci-fi royalty at one of *SFX*’s Weekenders, all presided over by master of ceremonies Craig Charles was joyful.



NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

- Check out *The Box Of Delights* by Richard Marson, a fascinating account of three decades of BBC children’s TV.

400 MEMORY

- I’m still proud of getting Russell T Davies together with the legendary Verity Lambert, *Doctor Who*’s first producer, for a joint interview. A proper piece of history.



TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

- *Pluribus* is a brilliant sci-fi takedown of the insanity of the tech hive mind steamrolling of humanity. Vince Gilligan and Rhea Seehorn are killing it in every episode.

- *Primal* season three is a crazy reinvention of Genndy Tartakovsky’s violent pulp drama.

400 MEMORY

- I got my first commission from Nick 22 years ago for a Terry O’Quinn *Lost* interview. Not long after, my first and only print story featuring a commissioned art piece (on *Lost* theories!) A career of incredible memories since.

**THE
FUTURE
FIRST!**

Red Alert

JANUARY
2026

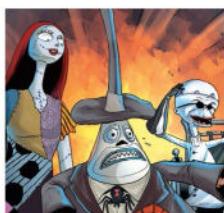
→ NEWS // INTERVIEWS // INSIGHT // WONDER!



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The mighty Godzilla is getting everywhere these days

Highlights



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→ The countdown to Halloween begins!



18 PRIMATE

→ When pet chimps go bad – and no, it's not the story of Michael Jackson's Bubbles.



20 A KNIGHT OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS

→ A name so long all we can say is it's a *Game Of Thrones* prequel.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

The Law Machine

Chris Pratt faces AI justice in Timur Bekmambetov's **Mercy**

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



Court is in session for an intense 90-minute trial.

→ SOME SEE AI AS AN existential threat. Others glimpse transformative potential. So just what is this headline-stealing revolution that's come to define our fractured, uneasy times? Apocalypse or promise? "It's both!" offers filmmaker Timur Bekmambetov. "It's very painful and a tragedy for many people. And it's also an opportunity for many people. But there's a third interpretation. It's not an evil, it's not an angel. It's not an enemy, it's not a friend. It's a *child*. We created it and we will

continue to educate, train and teach it, in the same way we are teaching our children to be like us, to be better than we are."

In Bekmambetov's near-future thriller *Mercy*, AI has chillingly ascended to other roles in society: judge, jury and executioner. As embodied by Rebecca Ferguson's Judge Maddox of the Mercy Capital Court, it's the digital face of law in an age of rampant criminality. Justice by algorithm.

"I really worry that the movie we made will be outdated by the time we release it," laughs Bekmambetov, who won international acclaim for 2004's Russian supernatural thriller *Night Watch*. "Elon Musk has already announced he wants to engage AI to judge!"

On trial is Chris Pratt as LAPD officer – and early champion of the *Mercy* program – Chris Raven, accused of murdering his wife. It's a darker scenario for a star best known for likeably brash, boyish turns in the *Jurassic World* and *Guardians Of The Galaxy* franchises. "There's yin-yang," says Bekmambetov. "It's a contrast. It's how I work. If I'm talking about someone who looks like a good person I need to find some darkness. Not because I want to make it grey, just to make it

even brighter. You need to have some dark side to be able to flash the light."

"I couldn't imagine this project without Chris, because you do not expect him to be a murderer, even though every fact, every piece of evidence, is telling us – and him – that he did it. This whole movie is based on that contrast. We know it's him, but we can't believe it's him. It's a film noir and we're watching it scene by scene and going deeper and deeper, darker and darker."

Raven has just 90 minutes to prove his innocence in court, an adrenaline-firing countdown in sync with the movie's running time. If his guilt fails to fall beneath a 92% threshold, then execution awaits. As Judge

“It’s the digital face of law in an age of rampant criminality”



In 2029 Los Angeles, the police have hoverbikes.



Bekmambetov on set with Christ Pratt and Kali Reis.

Maddox coolly informs him, "the clock is ticking."

"It made the storytelling simpler," Bekmambetov tells Red Alert. "Because you have a structure, you have a heartbeat in the story. People will be engaged because they feel it's ticking, they feel it's real."

To exonerate himself, Raven trawls the city's municipal cloud, a vast, virtual storehouse of information and visual evidence pulled from every camera, phone and database in Los Angeles. Bekmambetov calls it a "strategic confrontation between two realities," between the real world and the virtual. "It's a lot of very elegantly choreographed found

footage, like a ballet of found footage!"

Mercy uses cutting-edge augmented-reality technology to turn this found footage into cinematic spectacle.

"I want audiences to be in Chris' shoes," says Bekmambetov. "It's very straightforward – he's in the chair for 90 minutes and his fate, his destiny, is all about the screens flying around him. My vision was to create a new type of experience. It's not stereo, it's not 3D. It's an AR movie."

"It's not about depth in the screen. Usually with all the stereo movies it's about how to make the world behind the screen three-dimensional. But in our case the

screens are in the theatre. It's a special trick I invented, it's magic. You have a 100% illusion that the screens are flying right next to you and you are experiencing the same thing Chris Pratt is experiencing in the movie."

Bekmambetov shares a final, suitably unsettling thought on what he believes should now be called "artificial consciousness".

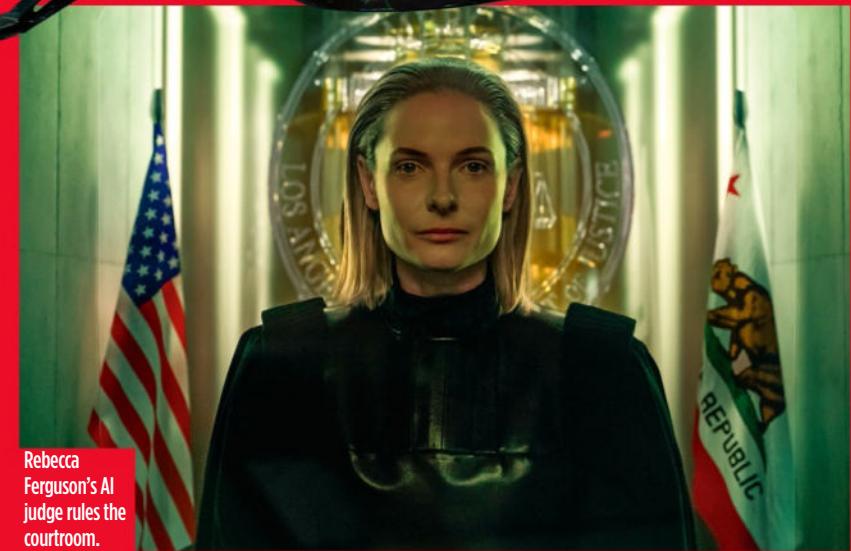
"AI is already controlling our lives. My logic is quite simple. AI needs data to learn and develop itself, and that data should be good quality. Jean-Paul Sartre said that the existential situation makes us perform honestly. Put a person on

the edge to get their real reactions and deeds.

"And this is why I think there are so many conflicts today, so much anger and aggression, because AI provokes us to dramatise things, to fight with each other, because it's the only way it can get better data. We are serving it by expressing ourselves in these dramatic situations."

Bekmambetov smiles. "This movie is just one case. Maybe AI created this whole case to learn about Chris Pratt!"

Mercy is in cinemas from 23 January.



SCI-FACT! Bekmambetov previously worked with Chris Pratt on 2008's Mark Millar comic book adaptation *Wanted*.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Scare Bear

The Nightmare Before Christmas returns to comics with **The Shiver Of Christmas Town**

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

→ GROWING UP IN Norway, Torunn Grønbekk didn't discover Halloween until the '90s, falling in love with Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, first released in 1993. Attributing it to her "very public love for the property, which made them look my way," she's now scripting Dynamite Entertainment's new four-issue *The Nightmare Before Christmas* miniseries, *The Shiver Of Christmas Town*.

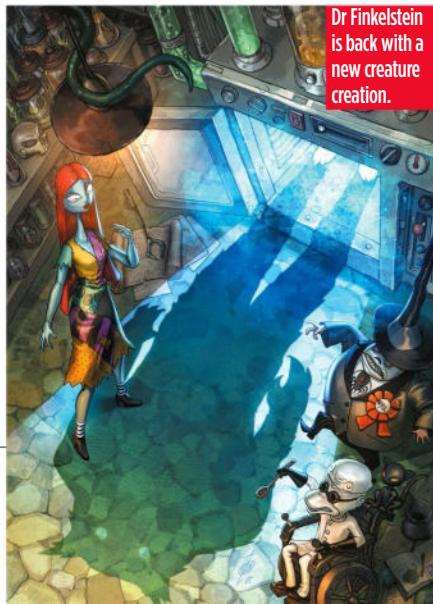
"I was a gothy kid, and *The Nightmare Before Christmas* seemed like the most magical thing I'd ever seen," Grønbekk recalls. "We still watch it every Halloween, and we like to project it onto the wall of the barn of our property, much to the delight of every trick-or-treater in the neighbourhood. The holiday is still very new here, and we don't go all out with decorations the way you see in the States, so the kids are always excited when the grown-ups join in on the fun."

Describing it as "neither mocking nor pretentious," Grønbekk believes *The Nightmare Before Christmas*' appeal transcends both the spooky and festive seasons. "That's a rare thing when depicting darker creatures and themes," she says. "There's a joy to it that resonates across many subcultures, and its enduring popularity is a testament to its quality. I was



heavily into metal and the alternative music scene in the '90s and scoffed at anything that felt too pop or popular. But *The Nightmare Before Christmas* managed to break through and charm us all."

With shades of *Frankenstein*, *The Shiver Of Christmas Town* begins with Dr Finkelstein creating a new, unexpectedly adorable creature that he orders his long-time charge Sally to look after, which inevitably leads to tension. "Shiver is cute and small – everything that's considered wrong in Halloween Town," Grønbekk teases.



Dr Finkelstein is back with a new creature creation.



How will sweet Shiver fit into this spooky, scary world?

"Dr Finkelstein, who intended to create a terrifying monster for Halloween, views the bear as a failure, which I thought was a fascinating way into the character. There's something inherently interesting about having to make your own way and find your own purpose when you fail to meet expectations – especially those of your creator. Sally, on the other hand, sees Shiver's charm immediately."

Sally and Shiver soon get mixed up with *The Nightmare Before Christmas*' resident three stooges. "I have a soft spot for Lock, Stock and Barrel," adds Grønbekk. "They're heading for Christmas Town for a trick-or-treat adventure – almost like a cultural exchange – and there's bound to be some mischief. Writing them was the most joyful part of this book. They have a wonderful rapport, and there's so much character baked into each of them."

Stating that "he has done an amazing job recreating the style of the movie," Grønbekk is impressed with artist Edu Menna. "In many ways, his job is more challenging than mine since the visuals are so important to this world in particular," she says. "Adriano Augusto's colours are also a perfect match, and I think fans of the movie will recognise and appreciate how beautifully it all comes together." ●

“There's a joy to it that resonates across many subcultures”

Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas: The Shiver Of Christmas Town is out on 7 January.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

No Way Home

Tomb Raider returns to comics in new miniseries *Sacred Artifacts* WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

→ WITH THE SECOND SEASON OF *The Legend Of Lara Croft* recently screening on Netflix, *Tomb Raider* is now returning to comics for the first time in almost a decade in new Dark Horse miniseries *Sacred Artifacts*. Set a few months after 2008's *Underworld* game, the four-parter finds the British adventurer homeless after Croft Manor burns down, providing an ideal jumping-on point for new readers.

"Lara takes stock of her life but, to me, that's something she does pretty regularly," writer Casey Gilly tells Red Alert. "Lara has faced death so many times that it felt impossible to me that she wouldn't have already accepted her mortality, but what I wanted to explore was her relationship to her legacy. Does she want to be part of restoring Croft Manor and to continue with her archaeological career, and does she want her family's history to continue shaping her present, knowing that it brings so much danger to her door? You'll definitely see some familiar faces, as Lara

has a small but loyal social circle and she doesn't let outsiders in too easily."

While Gilly says, "I don't want to give anything away, because her adversary is a character I really loved creating and I want readers to enjoy seeing their story unfold," she does reveal that Lara encounters a mysterious foe, who evidently has got hold of the dangerous titular Sacred Artifact.

"Lara is determining what's most precious to her," continues Gilly.

"She's deciding what her future looks like, what role raiding will play in it and how she wants to approach the next phase of her life. Everything she's done was to keep the world safe, to protect the mysteries of the universe and to protect history... but what else might be important to her?"

Praising the former for his "amazing design" of Lara's enigmatic enemy, Gilly has enjoyed working with both artist Antonio Di Caprio and colourist Eren Angiolini. "Antonio draws Lara like a violin being played by a blade – she's elegant, classical and dangerous," she says. "He captures her refinement in such a realistic way, which was very important to me. We were discussing her appearance for this arc, as I wanted Lara's style to be a bit more elevated, her wardrobe chic and timeless and her styling to reflect her status. He nailed it at every possible turn. Without giving spoilers, there's a very complicated dress in issue two that Antonio designed beautifully. And Eren makes the series dance. Colouring choices are rich, inviting, dramatic and emotional. They understand the nuance of anatomy and draw the eye to the action of the scene."

"I consider writing licensed comics sacred" says Gilly, who also recently scripted IDW's *Return To Sleepy Hollow*.

"I want to honour all the different versions of Lara we've seen while distilling her true nature into this more mature, poised and thoughtful version," she says.

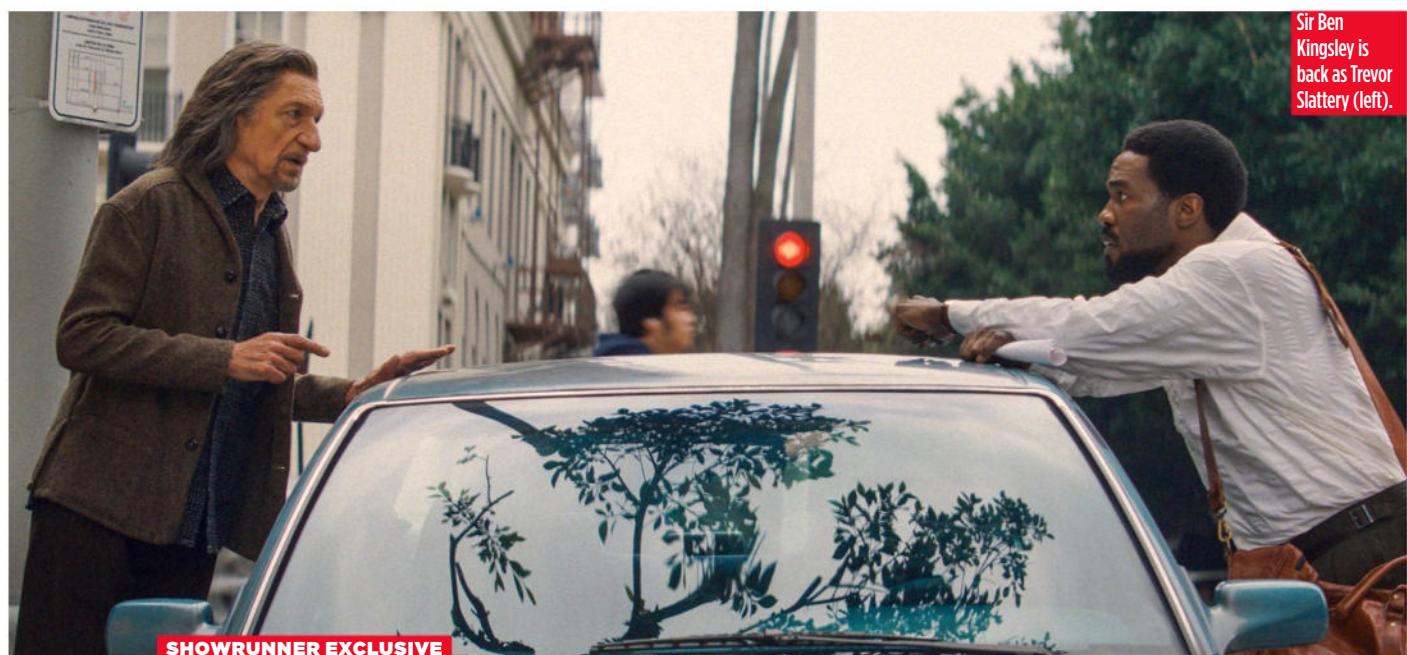
"Lara has such a diverse history, so my job is to find the core of who she is and bring it to life." ●

Tomb Raider: Sacred Artifacts is out on 14 January.



SCI-FACT!

Tomb Raider comics were first published by Top Cow from 1999 to 2005 before Dark Horse Comics secured the licence in 2013.



Sir Ben Kingsley is back as Trevor Slattery (left).

Hero For Hollywood

Wonder Man gets the meta treatment for the new Marvel Spotlight series

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

 SINCE WANDAVISION launched the era of Marvel Studios series on Disney+ four years ago, there has been no shortage of variety: animated series, comedies, a sapphic dramedy and a Netflix series reimagining, and now with *Wonder Man*, their 17th series, their first attempt at prestige TV.

Co-creator (with Destin Daniel Cretton)/showrunner Andrew Guest (*Hawkeye*) tells Red Alert

that from the moment he came onto the project in 2023, *Wonder Man* was intentionally developed to feel different. "We always internally talked about it like, 'What if FX did a Marvel series?'" he explains.

This is not a surprise, considering that a big part of what became *Wonder Man* started as Cretton's idea

to make a meaty character vehicle for acting legend (and now 13-year MCU veteran) Sir Ben Kingsley.

"Destin was shooting *Shang-Chi* with Sir Ben Kingsley and loved working with him," Guest says of the show's own origin story. "He turned to Jonathan Schwartz, his producer on that, and said, 'Why don't we do a show where Trevor's character goes to Hollywood?'

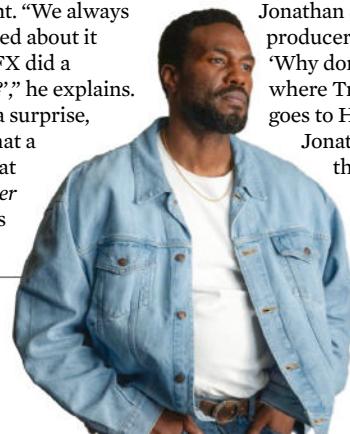
Jonathan got excited, and they started talking about how it might work." At the same

time, MCU executives were working on a *Wonder Man* show set in Hollywood. Eventually, the two ideas were fused together into this *very* meta series that has Kingsley's notorious

Trevor Slattery auditioning with the hungry up-and-comer Simon Williams (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) for a big-screen reimagining of the '80s TV series *Wonder Man*.

Unlike anything else in the MCU, *Wonder Man* adopts a Robert Altman's *The Player* aesthetic, while centring on a deeply serious Williams, who has the vibes of Dustin Hoffman's intense actor Michael Dorsey in *Tootsie* (1982).

Guest says that he and his MCU execs bonded over their love of Hollywood storytelling. "Yes, they love comics, but these guys grew



“He has powers, but he doesn’t want them”



“Son, you’ll get nowhere in Hollywood without shoes.”

up on movies, and they have such a passion and a love for it,” he enthuses. “This was a way for all of us to tap into our love of this industry. When we started production, it was also true of everybody on the crew. It felt personal to all of us because we all connect to this idea of trying to make it in this town.”

With Slattery and his Mandarin roots going back to *Iron Man 3* (2013) well known, Guest says it was up to him to figure out Williams, asking who is this other guy and how do we balance superheroism with the industry? He says reading an older interview with a method actor inspired the question that opened his path into Williams.

“I was like, ‘If you gave that

person superpowers, he wouldn’t care. He just wants to be Daniel Day-Lewis, right?’,” Guest explains.

“Once I figured that out, I was like, ‘Oh, that’s who Wonder Man is.’ He has powers, but he doesn’t want them. He doesn’t like superheroes. He likes art movies. He wants to be an artist. So how does being super-strong help you become an artist? It doesn’t,” he says of the quandary at the heart of the show. “Once I figured that out, I was like, ‘Okay, now I know who he is, and I know who Trevor is, so why are they together?’ And that was the next puzzle piece.”

Over the eight episodes of *Wonder Man*, the duo bond in their quest to navigate the pitfalls of the industry, with minimal

incursions from the ongoing tapestry of the MCU. “One of the things we wanted to do was have no homework for the audience,” Guest explains. “Being able to watch a show where you don’t need to have seen the last Marvel movie, or any Marvel movie, to enjoy this series. We were like, ‘How do we tell this story, about these two characters, where the special effects are the performances?’ Our locations and getting to shoot in Hollywood is us really using this world around us to make it feel real.”

They do fudge that divide somewhat, mind you, by weaving in the MCU-established Department of Damage Control (DODC) as the antagonist, represented by recurring character

Agent P Cleary (Arian Moayed), who becomes a very big thorn in Trevor and Simon’s sides.

Guest hopes audiences react well to their love letter to superhero movies and moviemaking. “This project was sort of a *The Little Engine That Could*,” he says, referring to production delays caused by strikes and Marvel Studios’ reprioritisations of their projects. “Somehow we danced through the raindrops and survived. So many people have put so much time and energy into this thing... I just hope they’re proud when they see this show, everyone who worked on it.” ●

Wonder Man is on Disney+ from 27 January.

► SCI-FACT!

Agent Cleary first appeared in *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), and then returned in the MCU series *Ms Marvel* (2022).



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Lesley Li's cover art for *Sorcerer Supreme*.



Issue three, due out in February, sees Wanda stuck in Limbo.

Colour Of Magic

Scarlet Witch is unveiled as Marvel's new **Sorcerer Supreme** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

WITH WRITER STEVE ORLANDO describing it as "a natural evolution of *One World Under Doom* and Scarlet Witch", Wanda Maximoff is now taking up the mantle of Marvel's master magician after Victor Von Doom's recent downfall while long-time incumbent Stephen Strange is traversing Asgard's Nine Realms.

"All the ways Wanda is not like Doom are the reasons she becomes Sorcerer Supreme," says Orlando, who has scripted Scarlet Witch's

numerous titles over the past three years, insisting that the Queen of Chaos will stubbornly remain herself.

"Wanda doesn't fit the mould, she makes the mould fit her," he continues. "So even as the Sorcerer Supreme, she brings the traits that make her who is – fierce loyalty, intense compassion, proud provocation and devastating loyalty."

But Wanda's new status doesn't find favour with the Vishanti, who appoint their own

Sorcerer Supreme in Agatha Harkness. "Anyone who upends established norms is always going to be disruptive, and Wanda is the primal disruptor," explains Orlando. "The new role brings new rubrics – suddenly people who didn't mind Wanda as the Scarlet Witch mind her as Sorcerer Supreme. It's very much a feeling that she should know her place, stick to her lane. But Wanda's lane is always where help is needed, no matter what. If there was a ceiling for Wanda, she never acknowledged it and she won't let others build it over her head."

Rescuing Doctor Strange's magical devices, the Cloak of Levitation and the Eye of Agamotto, "is no small feat", and Orlando won't confirm whether the Emporium and the Last Door (Wanda's erstwhile surroundings) "survive the spellcraft". But he does say we can expect to see some familiar faces as Wanda forms an advisory council whose ranks include



Purple reign:
Costumes
by Russell
Dauterman.

Clea, Wiccan and Chthon. "We haven't revealed them all yet but each of them offers unique insight either into Wanda personally or into the concepts she holds most dear, possibly chaos and even time and dreams, which all revolve around possibility. And while we've seen Chthon, we haven't seen advisors who know the other concepts well."

Waking up in Limbo, Wanda first battles Madelyne Pryor before facing some of Doctor Strange's old enemies, including Dormammu and Nightmare. "As always with Scarlet Witch, we're delivering new ideas alongside the classics," says Orlando. "You'll see new artefacts empowering Agatha – the Cloak of Devastation and the Skull of Necrom. You'll see threats like the Night Terrors, Nightmare's spawn with

“If there was a ceiling for Wanda, she never acknowledged it and she won’t let others build it”

Nemesis the first Nightmare, who wants their father's throat just as much as Wanda's! Then there's the Extinction Weapons..."

Praising artist Bernard Chang's design sense – "his characters feel fresh, their looks speak to who they are and they're deeply modern" – Orlando also enthuses about Russell Dauterman's costume design. "He's brought a lot of purple in and I love the power of the look, the confidence, elegance and replacement of metal jewellery with glowing effects," he says. "With Wanda, not everything is literal or physical, so it makes perfect sense that her new look is woven with more than material – it's woven with the stuff of magic itself!"

Sorceress Supreme is out on 31 December.

EDITOR EXCLUSIVE

Powering Up

IDW make light work of Godzilla's death as the King Kaiju is reborn as **Energy Godzilla** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

WHILE DAN JURGENS'S COVER homages 1993's *Death Of Superman*, the King of the Monsters doesn't technically die in *Godzilla* issue six. However, it still brings the first half-year of IDW's Kai-Sei Era to a sensational close while also setting up some intriguing possibilities for the next six months, as the giant kaiju immediately returns as a creature of pure light.

"The Kai-Sei Era has been about creating characters and scenarios and then almost literally sitting back and watching the chaos unfold, so we created our new version of Godzilla and our new protagonist, Jacen Braid, who is the catalyst that creates Energy Godzilla, while Lament also pulls lots of strings," says editor Jake Williams, referring respectively to G-Force's resident G-mutant and the villainous, highly intelligent kaiju. "We then put them on a path towards mutual destruction, watching and waiting for a big battle to occur. As we got closer, it became obvious how it should end, and the story options that were presented by the destruction of Godzilla's physical body were too good to ignore."

While *The Fall Of Godzilla*'s after-effects are also felt in the two other Kai-Sei Era series, *Escape The Deadzone* and *Starship Godzilla*, the direct impact is initially confined to the titular flagship title. "The fallout of Energy Godzilla will certainly be one of the elements that leads to the eventual crossover," teases Williams. "Now that all of the books are wrapping up their first arcs, and have firmly established their own stories and tones,

we're going to start having more connective tissue moving forward."

While the Kai-Sei Era is a shared universe, the three books have remained strictly separate up to this point, although that might be about to change. "It was important to give each of them the space to breathe and develop their own identity," says Williams. "*Deadzone*, *Starship* and the ongoing [title] are all incredibly different books, and right now the characters and events are contained to their own books. So for now the only place to see Energy Godzilla is in the ongoing, although we'll eventually see how these events affected the characters in the other books."

As writer Tim Seeley wrote in *Godzilla* issue one, Kai-Sei means "strange beast energy", and the giant reptile's new form brings new meaning to this era. "Godzilla being reborn as a being of pure energy is our way of saying that Godzilla is the life source of this universe – both literally and metaphorically!" explains Williams, confirming that both *Enter The Deadzone* and *Starship Godzilla* are back in 2026, which will also bring some new additions. "The future of the Kai-Sei Era is bright!"

While Williams is impressed by original artist Nikola Čižmešija's ability to illustrate "the sheer scale of these massive kaiju fights", Hendry Prasetya takes over from issue seven. "Hendry's art serves as a visual reset, which suits this next stage of the story," he says. "It feels a tad more grim and gritty, which is perfect for where we're at." ●

Godzilla issue six is out on 7 January.



A fresh start
for Godzilla
– without his
physical body.

► **SCI-FACT!**

Marvel's next *Godzilla* series *Infinity Roar* is out in February. It will pit him against space-based characters, including the Skrulls.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Crisis On Alternate Earth

It's Doomsday for the Ultimate Universe in **Ultimate Endgame**

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

WITH ITS VARIOUS titles, including *Ultimate Spider-Man*, *Ultimate X-Men* and *Ultimate Black Panther*, all finishing with issue 24 in the next few months, the Ultimate Universe's latest iteration is coming to a sensational conclusion in five-issue miniseries *Ultimate Endgame*, which Marvel confirms really is the final bow for its latest alternate dimension.

"There are a lot of spinning plates to manage with something at this scale, and it's new for me – but also really beautiful," says writer Deniz Camp, who also scripts *The Ultimates*. "I've never really gotten to do anything on this scale before, with this many characters and this big a scope. I've got a lot of stories I've set up I want to pay off, making sure to do justice to the other books' characters and respecting the work of those creators. It's a fun challenge."

Counting down the months until the villainous Maker – who has been trapped in the futuristic city by Howard Stark – returns to enact his nefarious plan, Camp and artist Juan Frigeri have adopted a real-time approach since relaunching the Ultimate Universe team book in June 2024.

"It's an attempt to distinguish how these books feel to the readers in the same way that the widescreen style did for the

original *Ultimates*, which was more artist-driven, while I guess this is more writer-driven," he says. "But the end result is a pace that feels unique from most of what else that's out there. Personally, I loved the challenge and feel it's pushed me in directions I otherwise might not have gone. Yes, it removed some tools from the toolbox, but coming up with workarounds for that was fun and made the books feel different to anything else out there. As for *Endgame*, the real-time approach will be intact... sort of. You've got to read it to find out!"

REED THE ROOM

Hailing from the first Ultimate Universe, the Maker was initially the *Ultimate Fantastic Four*'s Mr Fantastic before turning to the dark side, which is made more complicated by the fact that the Ultimates' Doom is actually yet another Reed Richards. "The whole Reed/Reed dimension is so interesting, and so full of hatred, self-loathing and jealousy and all this rich material," says Camp. "I love and have always loved the Maker, and what I love about him



It's a dash of the titans in this ending to *Ultimates*.





The art comes from Terry Dodson and Jonas Scharf.



is that when Brian Michael Bendis, Mark Millar and Adam Kubert co-created him, they had every intention of him being a hero. But there were all these little things that kept emerging naturally, some pettiness, arrogance, self-absorption... and he naturally progressed into this thing. I just love that you can read his whole story and see this weirdly natural progression into what he's become, where even the writers didn't really know what they were doing. The character kind of came alive."

From Peach Momoko's Japanese X-Men to the Black Panther's Wakandan adventures, *Ultimate Wolverine*'s Russian super-soldiers and *Ultimates'* Native American Hawkeye, Charli

Ramsey, the *Ultimate* line-up has spanned the globe and emphasised diversity, which Camp continues to do with *Ultimate Endgame*.

"You're going to see many new takes on old characters, and many of them are very surprising," he teases. "And there's a whole bunch of Luke Cage's *Ultimate* Avengers that you'll also meet."

With *Ultimate Spider-Man* and *Ultimate Black Panther* both wrapping up in January, *Ultimate X-Men* finishing in February and *The Ultimates*, *Ultimate Wolverine* and *Ultimate Endgame* itself concluding in April, Camp has liaised closely with the other creators. "I know where and when they all leave off and what's appropriate for the various characters," he says, hinting that

you should read the recent *Ultimate Spider-Man: Incursion* miniseries he co-wrote with Cody Ziglar to see the impact on the main 616 Marvel universe. Miles Morales brings back an Origin Box – a device that imbues individuals with superpowers – after his excursion to the *Ultimate* Universe, which has a bearing on next year's *Armageddon* crossover. "For the 6160, it's going to be surprising and devastating," he adds, referring to the *Ultimate* Universe. "There are real stakes and a real ending that we've literally been building towards for years."

Art chores on *Ultimate Endgame* are shared by Terry Dodson and Jonas Scharf, with each handling a different section of the book.

"They're each perfect at what they're doing, and such fine, delicate storytellers," says Camp. "It frees me up from having to write exposition and allows me to focus on the characters."

With "time having a crisis" in both, *Ultimate Endgame* shares some themes with *Assorted Crisis Events*, Camp's creator-owned Image series with artist Eric Zawadzki. "I suppose the idea that there's something wrong with the world, that everyday life is a dehumanising horror show, permeates both works," says Camp. "Also, the hope for things to get better, although that's much more active in *Ultimates*." ●

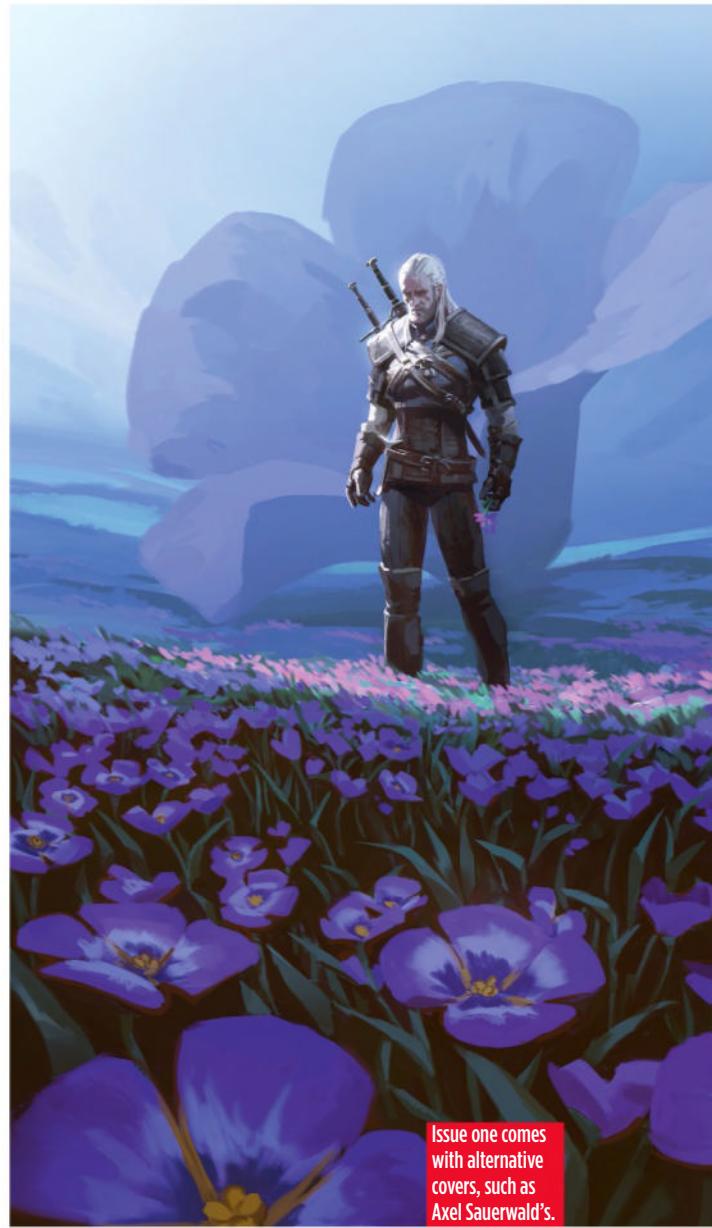
Ultimate Endgame is out on 31 December.

SCI-FACT! There's a blind-bag variant of *Ultimate Endgame* with covers by artists like Mark Brooks, Peach Momoko and Chip Zdarsky.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

In *Blood Stone*, Geralt is pushed to the limits.



Issue one comes with alternative covers, such as Axel Sauerwald's.

Miner Threat

Birdking's Daniel Freedman emphasises **The Witcher**'s horror side in new miniseries *Blood Stone* WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

→ DANIEL FREEDMAN "JUMPED AT the opportunity to write an original Witcher tale, as it's one of the few properties that aligns with my sensibilities" – and perhaps he was almost destined to write new Dark Horse Comics' miniseries *Blood Stone*, as he has much in common with the legendary Geralt of Rivia himself. "We share a similar view of humanity, that there is a monster in man that is unfortunately unkillable – which is very much what *Blood Stone* is about – both thematically and literally," says Freedman. The writer also believes that Geralt's adventures have much in common

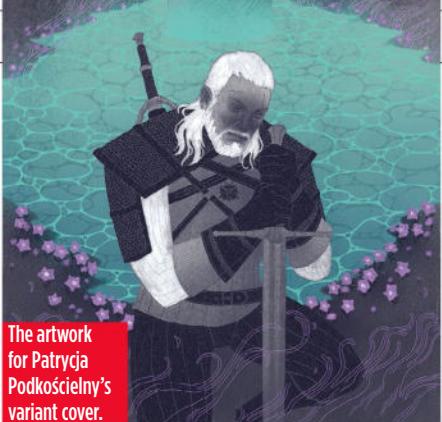
with *Birdking*, his graphic novel series with artist CROM, which Marcin Zwierzchowski from Witcher licence holders CD Projekt Red has described as "one of the best dark fantasy comics ever".

"I'm always moved to hear how far and wide the story has travelled and I can't wait to break everyone's hearts with the ending," continues Freedman. "Both it and *The Witcher* share heroes who are trapped in worlds that don't befit their values and morality but alas must push forward and do what they can to make things right."

The four-parter takes place around the

time of 2015 videogame *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*, although it is completely self-contained. "It has nothing to do with bridging the games or Ciri," he explains. "I did a tremendous amount of research, as I was a fan of *The Witcher 3* but wasn't as well read in the larger Witcher mythos as I am now. I read all the stories and comics that preceded me so I could have a grasp on not just Geralt and the lore but also what other writers had done with them, specifically in the comics."

It's set deep within and under the Kestrel Mountains, as Geralt investigates attacks at some dwarven mines only to discover a secret



The artwork for Patrycja Podkościelny's variant cover.



Geralt in a variant cover by artist Gigi Cavenago.

that should have been left buried. "One of my priorities when taking on *The Witcher* was to do something new, raw and different," teases Freedman. "I wanted to introduce more horror elements and push Geralt into corners he's never been in before where there's no good choice. I wanted to put him up against overwhelming odds where he's actually on the back foot and in danger, and ultimately have him confront a new kind of monster. Something *Witcher* fans have never seen before. I won't spoil what the monster is, but it's one that's mentioned very briefly in the original stories as well as the games but that has never been encountered or even glimpsed before."

Praising them for "capturing the weight and dread of the story", Freedman is impressed with artist Pius Bak and colourist Roman Titov. "*Blood Stone* is very linear and builds over the course of a short period of time with mounting tension and escalating results," he says. "Pius's chunky inks maintain a visual continuity that really puts you in Geralt's point of view as the world seems to rise up against him and Roman's colours make you feel like the creeping icy death of the mountain is all around." ●

The Witcher: Blood Stone is out on 28 January.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Hannibal Rising

Hannibal and Ishtar make for an ungodly duo in new fantasy comic **Vale Of Tears** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

→ BASED ON AN IDEA THAT Steve Kilbey – lead singer of Australian rock band The Church – had about Hannibal "being on the lam and how he was hiding out from the entire Roman Empire, who were looking for him", new miniseries *Vale Of Tears* sees the fearsome Carthaginian warlord forming an unholy pact with Ishtar, Mesopotamian goddess of war and love. Published by IPI Comics, adapted by scripter Jason Franks, and illustrated by UK-based Keith Donald, the four-parter is based on a speculative teleplay by Kilbey and co-writer Nicol Eilers, who insist they aren't downplaying the fantastical elements in favour of historical adventure.

"It's loosely based on fact and more loosely the lily has been gilded a lot," explains Kilbey. "I've always felt a deep connection to Hannibal and I feel like I've channelled some of that into this."

"The Roman Empire was such an interesting historical period, so there are a few facts there but some embellishments as well," continues Eilers. "What was an entire lifetime campaign of Hannibal's has been condensed to move the story forward."

"In Steve and Nicol's screenplay the mystical elements are as much psychological as they are literal," adds Franks. "The fantasy here also applies to the use of history. While I have tried to be accurate where possible, the story is only loosely based on history such as the layout of the city of Antioch in issue two, which is largely guesswork based on 19th-century sources since nobody really knows how it looked in 196 BC. Many of the characters were invented by Steve and Nicol, and others have been conflated or reimagined to suit the story."

With Donald revealing that he drew "visual inspiration from the classic, powerful archetype of a warrior like Conan the Barbarian" for his depiction of Hannibal, he is perhaps closer to King Conan, being in his fifties when we first meet him in Armenia. "He's a bit like Conan but not quite as physical perhaps and a lot more of a thinker, and very charismatic for sure," says Kilbey. "His relationship with his patron goddess is my favourite part and definitely makes me think of Odysseus and Athena as she saved his ass on numerous occasions in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, although they were not as close as our characters."

"Conan and Hannibal are both warriors with a chequered past," continues Eilers. "Maybe Conan was a bit more comfortable with being a warrior while Hannibal was forced or tricked into it by Ishtar, who is such a rich character, who injects some humour into grim times. The scenes between them were fun to write. They're both fiery personalities and have a complicated relationship, but deep down they have respect for each other."

"We also wanted to convey the heavy burden of command, the strategic mind behind the brawn, so his expressions and bearing reflect that gravity," adds Donald. "Ishtar, by contrast, was described as ethereal, other-worldly and powerful, so I had to translate that in visual form, to capture her mystical aura and make her feel both ancient and timeless." ●

Vale Of Tears is out now.



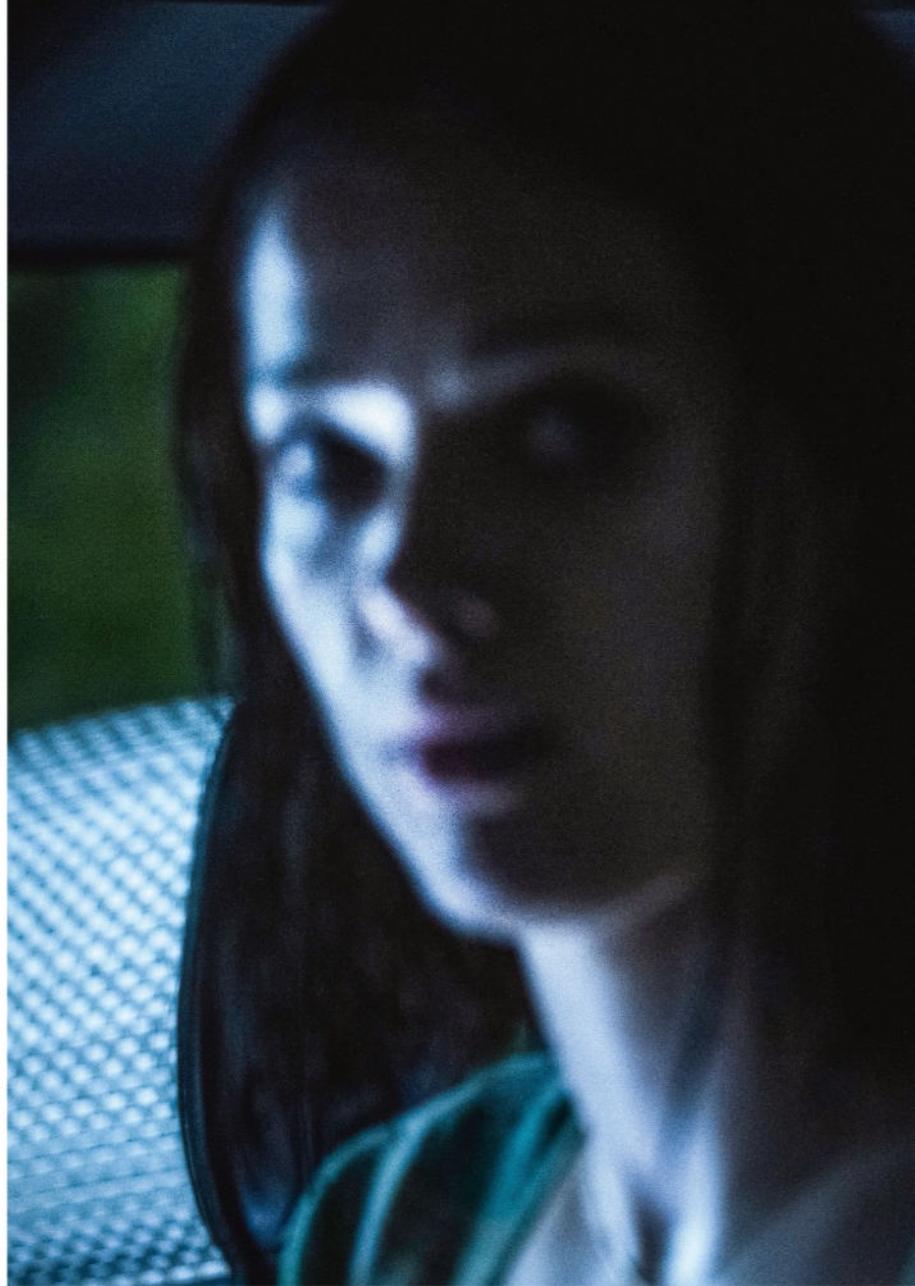
Ishtar takes Hannibal under her wings.

SCI-FACT!

Keith Donald has supplied the art for several of Steve Kilbey's albums with Martin Kennedy, which often have sci-fi themes.



DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE



The Ape Of Wrath

A chimp goes rabid in Johannes Roberts's horror **Primate**

WORDS: ROBBIE DUNLOP

→ “I COULD NOT IMAGINE a more terrifying thing than a rabid chimpanzee,” says *47 Meters Down* writer/director Johannes Roberts, explaining how the formidable *Pan troglodytes* ended up clawing its way into his newest creature feature. But, as he tells *Red Alert*, *Primate* started out with a very different antagonist altogether.

“My mum had a swimming pool, and her dog would run around it crazily, barking. I was like, ‘Do you know what? There’s an idea in this. What if the dog had rabies and the pool didn’t have a shallow end and you couldn’t get out?’” Roberts explains.

“So initially we wrote this with a dog. It was my love letter to [1983 Stephen King film] *Cujo*,” he

continues. “It just became like, ‘We have to give this something more, something different. What’s more terrifying than a dog?’”

Enter Ben. This scene-stealing chimpanzee is fast, calculating, and – as an interaction with a communication aid proves – he’s got a mischievous sense of humour to boot.

“He’s actually a shit!” Roberts laughs. “He’s evil... he’s like Freddy Krueger. That’s where the fun for me *really* comes in. He has a personality – he’s just terrifying.”

Primate opens with a healthy Ben residing in an enclosure outside the Hawaii home of his owner, Adam (Troy Kotsur). But soon after the arrival of Adam’s daughter Lucy (Johnny Sequoyah) and her college friends for a

getaway, he’s bitten by a wild animal and contracts rabies. Exposure to the water of the swimming pool only worsens his condition, sending the chimpanzee into a violent frenzy as he turns on the group – trapping some in the pool and hunting others through the house.

From the outset, Roberts knew exactly how Ben needed to be realised. “If he was going to be scary and engaging and terrifying, but human-like – to be able to have thought processes

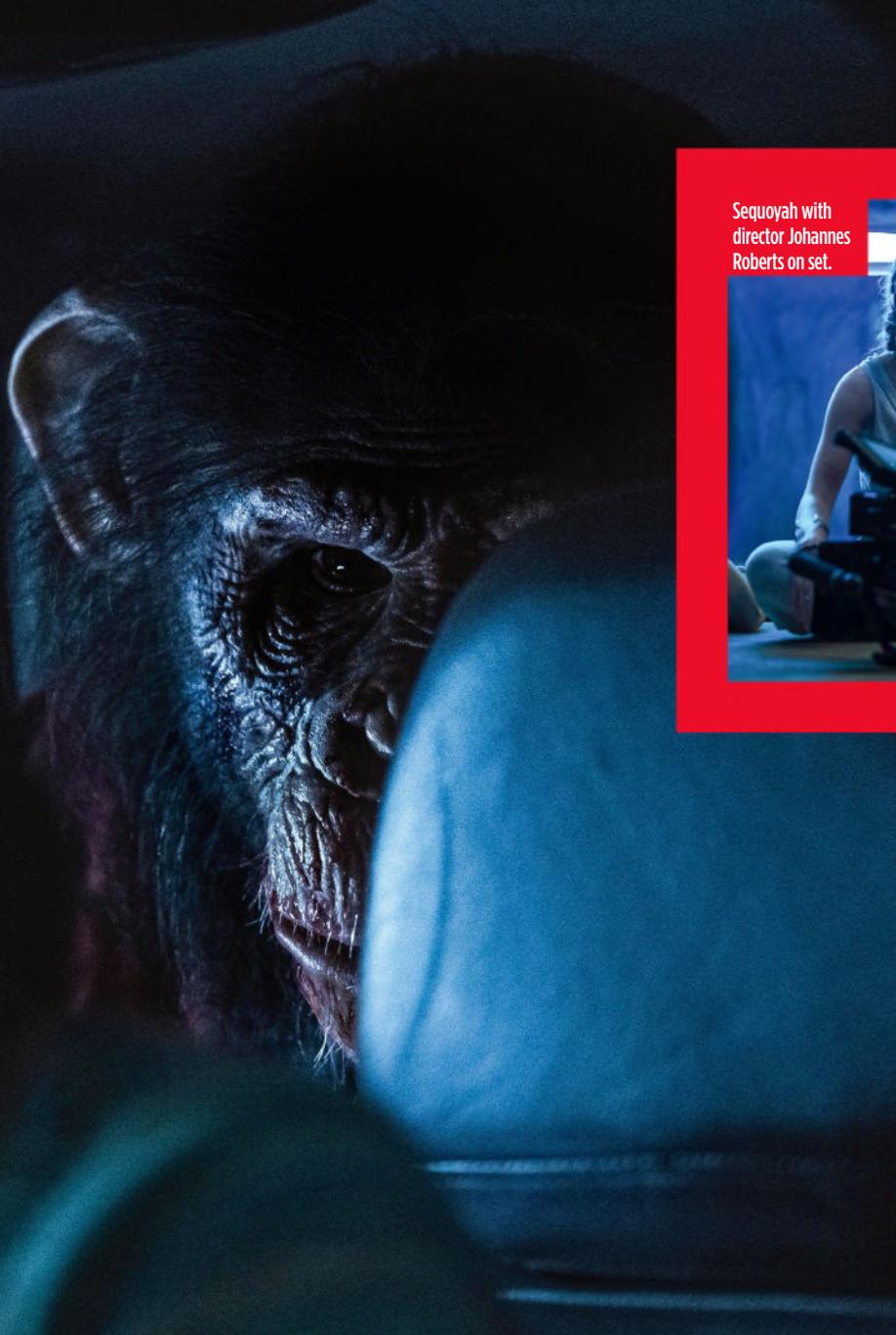
– we would have to go practical with him.”

The search for a creature performer “small but also incredibly powerful and agile” led the team to 5’4” Colombian actor Miguel Hernando Torres Umba. “He came in, he’d never been in anything before, and he just blew us away,” Roberts enthuses.

Umba proved to be exactly what he had been looking for: “Someone who could not just perform, but who had the stamina to get through a shoot like this, because it was really tough.”

The chimp’s bodysuit was crafted by special effects studio Millennium FX, who produced a series of interchangeable heads designed for different expressions and behaviours.

“We initially wrote this with a dog. It was my love letter to Cujo”



"There would be a happy Ben, there would be a snarling Ben, there would be a snapping Ben," Roberts explains. "Miguel could control the mouth to a certain degree, and then we had puppeteers that controlled the steering and the smiling and the eyebrows. There were different hands for different movements, extended arms, wire work."

Umba had to wear uncomfortable scleral lenses – "different ones depending on how far into the rabid stage he is" – but the toughest part for him was the heat inside the suit, which he endured for up to 10 hours a day.

"Sometimes he would take the head off and he'd be beetroot red,

and you would have to get five different fans on him, cooling him down desperately," Roberts recalls.

"I've never done something so intensely old school," he adds. "I think the film works because of Miguel's performance. It was wonderful. It gave Ben a personality – and that really is what drives the movie."

Primate's old-school spirit extends to Adrian Johnston's '80s-style score, while several key scenes – including a tense closet set-piece and the chilling final moments – carry the unmistakable influence of *Halloween*. Roberts says that director John Carpenter's work is

so deeply woven into his cinematic upbringing that it's "ingrained".

"It was so much fun making almost a slasher movie and shooting Ben as if he were Michael Myers," he grins. Equally exciting, he reflects, was "realising that you could do all these things that have maybe become 'tired out' through overuse and make them totally fresh again – because it's a chimpanzee". Not, he adds, that any of it was ever intended as a wink to the audience – "but the movie wears its influences on its sleeve".

Primate was always aimed at an R rating (US equivalent of a 15), but once production began pushing the limits of what they

could show on set, the gore naturally escalated. "And we never got any pushback," the filmmaker laughs. "So it was like, 'Great!' Then it became organic out of Miguel's performance. We started to see how powerful Ben was in the way he would rip people apart. It just became part of what he did – not about showing gore to gross people out or whatever. He literally was curious. He would peel people apart and rip them apart with his strength. It was a lot of fun to shoot all that stuff."

Calling the film an "extremely intense, at times funny and sometimes shocking thrill ride", Roberts notes that its release arrives 15 years after he first drafted the dog-led version. "It feels such a strange journey," he laughs. "I'm very happy to have made a movie that I never thought I would ever get to make – pure practical. To nod to *Cujo* and John Carpenter, but to make it for Paramount as well, it's like, 'Oh, man.' As a kid, this is the dream."

When we speak, Roberts is also looking ahead to a late-summer release for the third chapter in the *47 Meters Down* franchise, subtitled *The Wreck*, which he has co-written and produced. "I've been very hands-on with it and it's going to be so cool," he enthuses. "It's like a haunted house with a shark in an underwater wreck. I'm really looking forward to people seeing that one." ●

Primate is in cinemas from 30 January.

Sequoyah with director Johannes Roberts on set.



► SCI-FACT! Chimpanzees share more than 98% of their DNA with humans, making them our closest living relatives.

Ser Duncan
(Peter Claffey)
and Egg (Dexter
Sol Ansell).



SHOWRUNNER INTERVIEW

Game On

Showrunner Ira Parker discusses new six-part *Game Of Thrones* prequel **A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms** WORDS: DARREN SCOTT

How do you maintain distinctiveness for the show, but yet ensure that it's still very much a part of the *Game Of Thrones* universe?

Ultimately it just comes from getting to run these George RR Martin books through your own processor. David Benioff and Dan Weiss [the showrunners of *Game Of Thrones*] had theirs: very funny, it had everything. Ryan [Condal] was obviously doing his with *House Of The Dragon*, and this felt very natural, didn't feel like a reach. It was just what came out. I think we can all find a lot to relate to in our one leading character, Ser Duncan. Certainly, I put a lot of myself into him.

He's treading this strange world

– he's from the ass-end shithole of Westeros, the slums of Westeros of King's Landing, and doesn't have to know anyone, and he doesn't know anything. So all of these lords and ladies and princes and kings and queens that he encounters, it all seems just a little absurd, and he doesn't quite know if people are actually making fun of him or not, or if they're being serious. This is just the way that it is. A lot of really good, natural comedy just comes out of that situation.

What I love about this series is – and this was said to me, I didn't come up with this – that it feels like an on-ramp for people who maybe didn't watch the original series because it was very dark to

begin with. We take you on a little bit of a lighter, more friendly path to Westeros. Get to hang out, enjoy yourself for a little bit, and then it becomes Westeros. So then things are gonna happen. But that's the



Daniel Ings
as House
Baratheon's
Ser Lyonel.

fun of this world. It's like our world: anything could happen. Good and bad people die.

How did you expand George RR Martin's novellas?

The original series, I think, was thrusting towards 6,000 pages, and these novellas have maybe 100 pages each. So there was going to be a little bit of a building out. I had a lot of conversations early on with HBO and with George about where we can go. The idea was that the story is the story, the story of the novella, the beginning and the end. That's the story that we're going to tell. But then let's make a series that, if he had written a book for us, where would he have gone?

A lot of it is just having fun taking a character like Lyonel Baratheon, who on the page is a close-to-seven-foot giant who



Bertie Carvel
plays Iron Throne
heir Baelor
Targaryen.



Finn Bennett
stars as
Prince Aerion
Targaryen.



Dornish
puppeteer
Tanselle (Tanzyn
Crawford).



George RR
Martin's double
act are brought
to life.

“We take you on a little bit of a lighter, more friendly path”

laughs when he fights. Hopefully anyone who's watched *Game Of Thrones* knows what the Baratheons can be like. He has one line in the novella – we thought, “You know what? Let's just have him and Dunk have dinner together.” It's a party. We're at, essentially, Glastonbury or Coachella; this is a tournament. It's lords and ladies and knights. They're all camping with their servants, and everyone's mixed together. Everybody's just having dinner in their tents and people are packed in. So we threw Dunk

into the mix, and we saw what happened and some very fun, enjoyable scenes and relationships have come out of this.

We also tried to build up that Dunk and Egg relationship as much as possible. We have two extraordinary actors who basically just became really good friends across the formation of this show and we show that on screen. We show a friendship being born. They're friends, they're brothers.

Talk about casting Dexter Sol Ansell, who plays Egg...

Dexter was actually the first casting email that I received from our casting director. First batch was a batch of Eggs, and number one, right at the top, Dexter Sol Ansell. I watched it. I said, “Oh,

perfect. He did it. He nailed it.” I called her up and I said, “What do we do now? Do we sign him up?” They said, “We have to go through a process here.” And we did, and we came all the way back to number one.

He's the best child actor that has ever existed on planet Earth. And to see his transformation in season one, which you all are going to get to see soon, he does some really, some really great stuff for us.

Peter [Claffey] was a very interesting case, because he was a former professional rugby player who played for Ireland and, obviously, Ser Duncan must be a very large human being. So when you start there already, it cuts out

every single actor in the world who has any experience. So we knew we were going for an unknown. The thing that we just loved about Peter is that every single time he came back in, he was exponentially better. That's sort of what you're looking for when you're going with someone who's just gonna work. And, man, does he just. Not only is he the absolute perfect Ser Duncan for a variety of reasons, and he put himself into that role, but he was also just such a leader for everybody who came in. He set the tone on set. He's such a lovely, happy person to be around. ●

A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms
is on Sky/NOW from 19 January.

SCI-FACT! There are three novellas (so far!) – *The Hedge Knight* (1998), *The Sworn Sword* (2003), and *The Mystery Knight* (2010).

► **SCI-FACT!** The Master's TARDIS appeared in the shape of a Doric column in "Logopolis", "Castrovalva" and "Time-Flight".

New Year, New Who!

If you're reading this issue on the on-sale date, it's just 359 days until we get to see the next episode of *Doctor Who* – but there's plenty to keep the (bad) wolf from the door until then...

Spinoff series *The War Between The Land And The Sea* has just concluded, but the soundtrack by Lorne Balfe joins the long-awaited – and recently released – Series 10 Murray Gold collection in getting a physical release. It's available to download and stream now, with a CD following on 30 January.

Second Doctor serial "The Wheel In Space" is the latest missing story to get a vinyl release, available from 13 February in a translucent bernalium blue. Fancy!

TWBTLATS also gets a Blu-ray and steelbook release – which will include the newly re-edited omnibus edition of "The Sea Devils", shown on BBC Four in December. This will sit nicely alongside the latest in Blu-ray

series *The Collection*, this time featuring Peter Davison's swansong, Season 21. Expect updated versions of all the stories (except "The Twin Dilemma", which is perfect as it is).

Finally, Character Options brought their 2025 Vortex Edition action-figure sets to a close with the release of Anthony Ainley's Master and TARDIS, and a double pack featuring Wrath Warriors Constable Zreeg and Sergeant Zogroth from "The Star Beast". Expect news on more releases shortly...



NEW AUTHOR

SHEN TAO

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND EPIC FANTASY *THE POET EMPRESS*



ANGIE WHITTEN OF HARMONY PHOTOGRAPHY

Tell us about your protagonist.

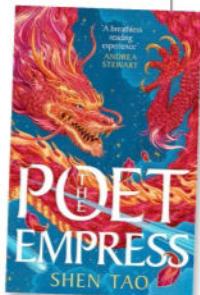
→ Wei, a young rice farmer, sees only one option to save her family from the famine: become a concubine in the deadly Azalea Dynasty court, to the infamously cruel Prince Terren. To survive, she'll have to learn poetry magic in secret – in a world where women are forbidden to read.

How does magic operate in this world?

→ I wanted to capture the power words can hold, particularly when written with truth and emotion. As a character in the story puts it, "If you've ever heard an affecting poem, you would have felt that stirring in your heart. Magic, waiting to free itself."

Do you have to do much research for a book like this?

→ While *The Poet Empress* is strictly fantasy, I did quite a bit of historical research for verisimilitude. I also revisited the Tang Dynasty poems I'd memorised as a child, to recapture the feelings within them. It was an era when poetry really flourished with famous poets like Li Bai and Meng Haoran. My favourite is "Returning Home" by He Zhizhang.



Do you have any advice for any SFX readers who are budding authors?

→ Be persistent, be bold, write from the heart. I wrote eight discarded manuscripts, over more than a decade, before *The Poet Empress*. The first story you write will be neither your best nor your last.

The Poet Empress is out on 20 January, published by Gollancz.



• *Star Trek Beyond*'s Justin Lin will helm an adaptation of interplanetary combat game **Helldivers**, from a script by *It's Gary Dauberman*.

• A new series of **Stargate** is in development at Amazon MGM, showrun by franchise veteran Martin Gero. Expect a "bold new chapter" in the saga that began on the big screen in 1994.

• **Alien: Earth** has been renewed for a second season.

• The next **Sonic The Hedgehog** movie arrives 22 December 2028.

• Paramount have handed the **Star Trek** movie franchise to Jonathan Goldstein and John Francis Daley, best known for

2023's *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* and the script for *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. We're promised a completely new take on the final frontier.

• *Skyfall*'s Thomas Newman will score Shawn Levy's **Star Wars: Starfighter**. Levy, meanwhile, says he's looking to recapture "the combination of theme, levity, adventure, heart, spectacle" of 1983's *Return Of The Jedi*. "Somehow that movie just got it right for me." Easy with the Ewoks, mate...

• *Shadow And Bone*'s Daisy Head will play Miss Doublefinger in season three of **One Piece**.

• Sam Raimi and Jordan Peele are teaming to produce the horror **Portrait Of God**, expanding on Dylan Clark's creepy viral short.

• Toby Wallace will lead Netflix's **Assassin's Creed**, rumoured to be set in Ancient Rome.

• A new live-action/CGI hybrid **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles** movie is targeting a 17 November 2028 release date.

• Kenneth Branagh will voice the titular creature in A24's **Goblin**, an improbable buddy comedy that's been described as *Ted* meets *ET*.

• The power of Christ compels her! Scarlett Johansson will lead Blumhouse's fresh take on **The Exorcist**, set to be written and directed by *Doctor Sleep*'s Mike Flanagan. Mind how you go with that projectile vomit, ScarJo...



• Eva Green is to play Aunt Ophelia in season three of Netflix hit **Wednesday**.

• Wyatt Russell is reportedly in the frame to reprise a young Lee Shaw for a **Monarch** prequel series, exploring the MonsterVerse during the Cold War.

• Marcello Hernández and Skyler Gisondo are joining the voice cast of the next **Shrek**, playing the ogre's sons Fergus and Farkle.

• Zack Snyder's animated series **Twilight Of The Gods** has been axed by Netflix after one season.

• **Black Adam**'s Noah Centineo is tipped to join Sydney Sweeney in the live-action **Gundam** movie.

• Noah Hawley and *Welcome To Wrexham*'s Rob McElhenney are collaborating on a TV adaptation of the **Far Cry** videogames. The show is planned as an anthology that will switch cast and setting each season.

• The fourth season of **House Of The Dragon** is set to air in 2028, while fellow *Game Of Thrones* brand extension *A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms* has won a second season, targeting 2027.

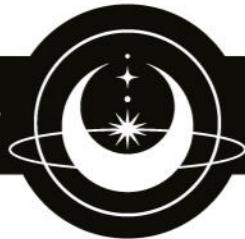
• Ryan Coogler confirms that a third **Black Panther** will be his next movie.

• The **Sharknado** franchise gets its own prequel in **Sharknado Origins**, showing us teenage versions of Fin and April and, we trust, lots of adorable baby sharks.



THE FINAL

FRONTIER



UDO KIER 1944-2025

Remembering a gloriously sinister screen icon

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



"I SEND OUT A VIBRATION,"

actor Udo Kier once confessed. A striking, magnetic presence, he brought a chillingly dissolute vibe to the screen in a career that straddled both arthouse and exploitation cinema and found him collaborating with everyone from Wim Wenders to Rob Zombie to Madonna.

Born Udo Kierspe in a Cologne maternity ward bombed mere hours after his arrival – he and his mother had to be rescued from the rubble – Kier moved to London at 19 to not only pursue an acting career but “get out of the misery I was born into”. Vogue crowned him “a new face of cinema” for his debut in 1966 short “Road To Saint Tropez”, while graphic West German/Austrian horror *Mark Of The Devil* secured him a suitably sinister lead role in 1970.

True cult iconhood arrived with *Flesh For Frankenstein* (1973) and *Blood For Dracula* (1974), shot back-to-back at Rome’s Cinecittà by Warhol acolyte

Paul Morrissey. Moving from the Baron to the sickly, undead Count required Kier to live on nothing but water and salad leaves. “I was so weak I couldn’t walk,” he remembered.

Dario Argento cast him in *Suspiria* (1977), while Walerian Borowczyk’s *Docteur Jekyll et les femmes* (1981) gave him another gothic icon to play in Henry Jekyll. Beyond Euro-horror, Hollywood projects included cyberpunk thriller *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), vampire elder Gitano Dragonetti in *Blade* (1998), and a turn opposite Arnold Schwarzenegger in the apocalyptic *End Of Days* (1999). A long-time collaboration with Lars von Trier included 1994 absurdist horror series *The Kingdom*, while John Carpenter directed him in a 2005 episode of *Masters Of Horror*.

“I can’t answer when people ask why I’m so sinister,” Kier told *Salon* in 2018. “People say to me, ‘You’re so evil,’ and yes, of course – the role required me to be evil!” ●

VIRGINIA/JULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY



MOVIESTORE/SHUTTERSTOCK

JUNE LOCKHART 1925-2025

• Best remembered as interstellar mom Dr Maureen Robinson in *Lost In Space*, Manhattan-born June Lockhart made her stage debut at the age of eight before appearing alongside her actor parents in Dickens adaptation *A Christmas Carol* (1938).

She won the lead role in fake-out horror *She-Wolf Of London* (1946), playing Phyllis Allenby, gaslit into believing she’s responsible for a series of lycanthropic murders. An early genre TV credit was “Death At My Fingertips”, a 1956 episode of *Science Fiction Theatre*.

Producer Irwin Allen cast Lockhart as the Robinson matriarch after being impressed by her performance in the 1964 *Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea* episode “The Ghost Of Moby Dick”. She was aboard the *Jupiter 2* between 1965-68, and returned to cameo in 1998’s big-screen revival.

Other genre credits include B-movie homage *Strange Invaders* (1983) and fantasy comedy *Troll* (1986), alongside daughter Anne, who played Lt Sheba in *Battlestar Galactica*.

CARL CIARFALIO 1953-2025

• “My career has always been the guy getting hit by the car and not so much driving the car, you know?” reflected stunt performer and actor Carl Ciarfalio.

Born in Alhambra, California, he was a college wrestler before working at a live stunt show. A prolific career in TV and film followed, taking in *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Flash*, *Babylon 5* and *Beetlejuice*. Ciarfalio won Best Fight Sequence at the 1985 Stuntman Awards for his work on *Knight Rider*.

In 1993 he stepped inside the rocky hide of the Thing in Roger Corman’s doomed-to-be-unreleased *The Fantastic Four*. He shares the distinction of being the first live-action incarnation of the character with Michael Bailey Smith, who voiced Ben Grimm.

Ciarfalio served as president of the Stuntmen’s Association of Motion Pictures from 1992-96, and helped establish the Emmy Award for Outstanding Stunt Coordination.

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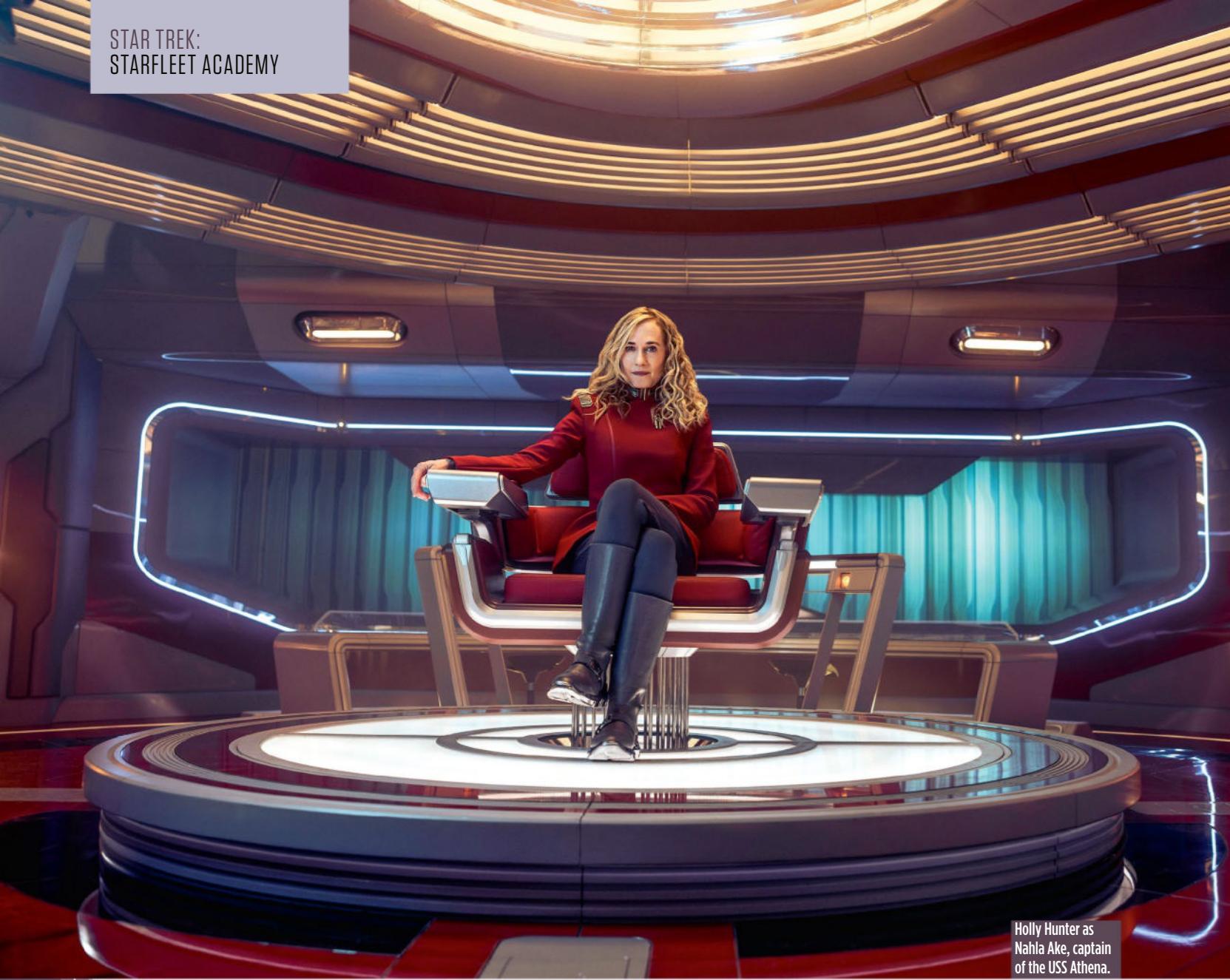




FIRST CLASS

STAR TREK IS GOING BACK TO SCHOOL... AS STARFLEET ACADEMY GEARS UP FOR ITS FIRST EVER SEMESTER, SHOWRUNNERS ALEX KURTZMAN AND NOGA LANDAU REVEAL WHAT'S ON THE CURRICULUM – AND WHY THEIR NEW SHOW IS GREY'S ANATOMY IN THE 32ND CENTURY

WORDS: RICHARD EDWARDS



Holly Hunter as
Nahla Ake, captain
of the USS Athena.

Ex Astris, Scientia – From the stars, knowledge

Starfleet Academy motto

STARFLEET ACADEMY HAS LONG HAD mythological status in *Star Trek* circles. It's the training school where Wesley Crusher attempted a dangerous stunt that got a classmate killed, and Jean-Luc Picard lived out some of his post-Enterprise retirement years as chancellor. It's also where two incarnations of James T Kirk cheated on their Kobayashi Maru tests.

But even though almost every major character in the 60-year-old franchise is a graduate of the famous San Francisco

campus, its actual screen appearances have been limited. Until now, that is, because the latest *Star Trek* TV show is heading to the classroom.

The idea of sending the franchise back to school is decades old. Following the critical and commercial mauling dished out to *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* in 1989 – y'know, the one where “God” tries to hitch a ride on the Enterprise – a script titled *The Academy Years/The First Adventure* found its way into development. The film would have been an origin story about Kirk and Spock becoming unlikely BFFs during their college days, until Paramount decided instead to give the ageing OG Enterprise crew a Cold War-themed swansong with *The Undiscovered Country*.

But the idea never really went away – there were novels and a videogame in the '90s, while alt-Kirk's multiple educational misdemeanours kickstarted his unlikely journey to the Enterprise bridge in JJ Abrams's big-screen reboot. Now – plugging a gap between the kids-in-space adventures of *Prodigy* and the

“These cadets, like all students, go through a remarkable journey of self-discovery”

aspiring young officers of *Lower Decks* – *Starfleet Academy* becomes the first *Trek* to set coordinates for bona fide YA territory.

“I think the thing that we felt most inspired by is the fact that on every other *Trek* show, your crew already knows who they are,” explains Alex Kurtzman, *Starfleet Academy* co-showrunner, franchise overlord and (coincidentally) co-screenwriter of the Abrams movie. “They've been through the Academy, they've made their decision about where they want their careers to go, and they can't make a ton of mistakes. But these cadets are still figuring it out, and like all students in college, you go through a remarkable journey of self-discovery over the course of those four years. Oftentimes what you enter into college



thinking you want to do, and what you leave college realising you want to do, are two very different things."

"There's a safety net built into being a student," adds the show's Oscar-winning star (and ship's captain) Holly Hunter. "It's a place where failure is not necessarily discouraged."

FEELING THE BURN

The honour roll on the wall of Starfleet Academy is like a Who's Who of Starfleet history – take a close look and you'll see everyone from Will Riker, Data and Harry Kim (who, we're happy to confirm, does eventually

reach the rank of admiral) to deeper cuts like Sito Jaxa and Peter Preston. But these well- (and less well-) known veterans represent a tiny fraction of the cadets who've passed through these hallowed halls, seeing as the new show is set in the 32nd century, 800 years or so after the Next Generation era.

It's a period of rapid expansion for the United Federation of Planets. The organisation was severely diminished when the so-called "Burn" neutralised dilithium across the galaxy, rendering warp flight all-but-impossible for 120 years. But, with the help of Michael Burnham and her *Star Trek: Discovery* crew

(freshly relocated from the 23rd century), interstellar travel is now back on the agenda, and the resurgent Federation has reopened the Academy at its old campus in San Francisco.

"The new show synchronises with the first two years of Starfleet returning to its full form," Kurtzman confirms when we ask about its place in the timeline. "The safest way to look at it is it's like when *Discovery* ends, we begin – but there's kind of a two-year overlap."

"What's exciting is that we get to forge ahead in the canon," adds co-showrunner Noga Landau. "We've never gone this far into the future before in *Star Trek* as a franchise, so it really allows us to imagine and create. Also, it gives us the opportunity to look back on almost 1,000 years of *Star Trek* history and celebrate it and peel it back."

"We have characters on our show who existed in the early centuries of Starfleet, because we have some of our Disco crew with us in Jett Reno [Tig Notaro] and Sylvia Tilly [Mary Wiseman]. Then we also have a character called the Doctor [Robert Picardo], who's from the time of *Voyager*. Everyone kind of meets up in the 32nd century."

Although *Discovery* spent three of its five seasons in this distant future, most of the crew were born and bred in the 23rd century. *Starfleet Academy* is the first *Trek* to shift the focus to characters who've grown up in a post-Burn universe, and – much like Professor Xavier and Magneto's students in *X-Men: First Class* – they represent the first intake of their newly opened school.

They come from a varied range of →

backgrounds: among the new students, there's a cocky, wayward kid who's grown up a fugitive, an unconventionally peaceful Klingon who longs to be a medical officer, and the first representative of a new holographic (or "photonic") species. (Although she appears to be 17, this "emissary" is actually closer to four months old.)

"Because of the Burn, they didn't grow up during a time of abundance, of peace, of stability," explains Landau. "Instead it was a time of desperation for a lot of people, so we have characters who grew up in refugee camps, or who grew up on Starfleet ships but have never set foot on a planet. We also have a character who basically grew up as a prince on a planet that had a rare supply of dilithium. They reflect the array of global experiences of young folks, in a way that I think is really important for the audience."

"*Star Trek* has always been a mirror that reflects the moment in which each series is made," continues Kurtzman. "The Federation is actually trying to return to its roots and embrace its core tenets, but the moment we're meeting right now is a world of kids who are inheriting a lot of damage and a lot of chaos, and it's up to them to figure out how they're going to make a brighter future out of it. So it felt to us that if you were to put *Starfleet Academy* in the halcyon days of the Federation, it would be a lovely fantasy, but it wouldn't really reflect what kids are going through now. It felt very topical and very relevant to put it in the 32nd century."

AN EDUCATION

Aside from Reno, Tilly and the returning Admiral Vance (Oded Fehr), the staff room won't just be populated by *Discovery* alumni. ("I love our *Discovery* actors so much," says Kurtzman, "but when you bring a beloved character back, there has to be a specific reason in the storytelling. It can't just be fan service.")

As previously mentioned, the artist formerly known as the Emergency Medical Hologram has tenure at the Academy, while the half-Klingon, half-Jem'Hadar Commander Lura Thok (Gina Yashere) is on hand to handle disciplinary matters.

At the top of the chain of command is the school's chancellor, Captain Nahla Ake (Holly Hunter). Like *Strange New Worlds'* engineer Pelia, she hails from the long-lived Lanthanite species, and is over four centuries old.

A Starfleet veteran, she can remember the

Captain Nahla Ake is also Chancellor of Starfleet Academy.



Zoë Steiner as Tarima Sadal and Sandro Rosta as Caleb Mir.



Gina Yashere as Lura Thok and Tig Notaro as Jett Reno.

“Nahla’s uniquely suited to her task; she’s seen a tremendous amount of life”

Federation before the Burn, and is riddled with guilt for her part in separating new recruit Caleb Mir (Sandro Rosta) from his mother (*Orphan Black*'s Tatiana Maslany) 15 years earlier. She also fulfills the unlikely dual roles of headteacher and ship's captain.

"I think there is an approachable aspect to being a woman leader in this world," says Hunter. "People might be more willing to reveal [themselves]. Nahla has lived long enough to understand that an emotional life doesn't have to be sequestered entirely from leadership. The combination of both roles encourages the cadets to view Nahla as a whole person, rather than only an arm of the Federation."

"We wrote the part for Holly," reveals Kurtzman. "Nahla's uniquely suited to her task, because she's seen a tremendous amount of life. She has that breadth of knowledge, that depth of understanding about human nature and the cosmos and our place in it. She's fair but also a disciplinarian who loves the kids but also isn't babying them, and that's really important. The idea that you would bring this kind of spontaneous, almost casualness – alongside fierce intelligence and humour – to somebody who had already been a captain, but also has the cred to be a chancellor... It just felt like a really unique way to put someone in charge of the school."

Just to distinguish Nahla from Kirk, Picard, Janeway and other predecessors in the big chair, she has a habit of walking around the Academy barefoot. She also has an even more unconventional approach to seating than Will Riker, and is often seen curling up in her captain's chair like an authoritative cat. →



“I’M THE YODA OF THE STAR TREK FRANCHISE”

Robert Picardo returns as an older, wiser Emergency Medical Hologram

How does working on a massive 21st-century streaming show compare to the *Star Trek: Voyager* days?

Who knew that they had the biggest soundstage in North America in Toronto? I found that out because our set is on it. *Starfleet Academy* is the biggest *Star Trek* I've ever been part of, and it makes *Voyager* - of which I'm very proud - feel a little quaint, almost.

Did you have any second thoughts about coming back?

Well, you always do, because *Voyager* is a well-loved iteration of *Star Trek*. There's a question of how the fans will accept me as a character who, in theory, never changes, even though the actor playing their beloved hologram is 30 years older, a little heavier, a little shorter. [In the show, the Emergency Medical Hologram has introduced a subroutine to his holographic matrix to make him age.]

I decided that the character was a deeper version of himself, but he still had the same humour, the same disdain for people he felt were not keeping up with the discussion, but also the deeper aspect of generations of life experience. I suppose I'm the Yoda of the *Star Trek* franchise - except I'm not green and hopefully my ears are not quite as big.

The Emergency Medical Hologram has been online for roughly eight centuries in *Starfleet Academy*. How has that changed his world view?

That's 800 years of digital memory, where the memory of a beloved colleague from 793 years ago is as fresh and clear as someone you saw yesterday. Only science fiction can give an actor a challenge like that to try to wrap your mind around! For a human actor who is certainly as concerned with the issues of mortality as anyone else my age, it's a funny leap of faith to try to put those personal concerns aside and imagine what this must be like to have generations of organic colleagues grow old and die around you. It's got to influence your interest in developing interpersonal relationships in future.

The Doctor became a mentor to Seven of Nine in *Voyager*. Do you think being a teacher was always his calling?

He was designed to administer emergency medical care on a part-time basis, so teaching anyone else anything - especially outside of his expertise - was not part of his

programming at all. But I do think his relationship with Seven was the beginning of his being a teacher. As she was trying to reclaim her humanity from having been a Borg, he fashioned himself as the ideal teacher of how to become human, even though he wasn't human. There was great comic potential in that notion, because it reflected the Doctor's high opinion of himself.



I AM SAM

Kerrice Brooks on playing Starfleet's pioneering photonic cadet

SAM (Series Acclimation Mil) is the first member of her holographic species to join Starfleet. Has that been an exciting aspect to explore?

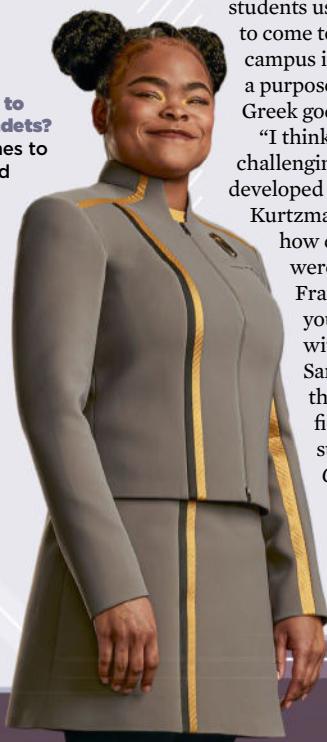
It's so cool. It feels like Spider-Man, in a way. I'm not trying to say I'm Peter Parker, but it feels like great power does come with great responsibility, to establish a species and try to give them a fully-fledged point of view, while trying to be as authentic as you can to the character and their circumstances.

SAM's four months old, though behaves as if she's 17. How do you start to portray that?

When I first read SAM on the page I realised that a lot of her reactions had no mal-intent, but I think to come from such a pure place... it really just means you have no environmental things that have shaped you. I had to try and get my body as neutral as possible, but also it took a lot of meditation and dealing with my inner child to understand what it means to feel safe. I think it takes a lot of bravery to be so open - it's like existing as a softshell crab, which can be scary.

Is it important to SAM to fit in with the other cadets?

All her knowledge comes to her within a second and that is something she is very proud of. But she wants to fit in. I don't think she dumb's herself down, but I do think she learns about the balance between what can be seen as "showing off" and finding her tribe who will accept her for who she is.



Paul Giamatti
is villain Nus
Braka.

"I guess I have to take responsibility for the lack of shoes!" Kurtzman laughs. "For some reason, I just thought it was hilarious that the chancellor would walk around the academy without shoes on - she's almost like a space hippy. We also talked a lot about how the way a captain sits in the chair carries an enormous amount of weight for fans. When the chips are down, when there's dire stakes, she's like any other captain would be. But when she's just floating through space, why shouldn't she curl up in the chair and read a book?"

This is an important note, because field trips are an integral part of the Starfleet Academy curriculum. Unlike the more stationary Hogwarts and Nevermore Academy - where students usually have to wait for adventures to come to them - the Starfleet Academy campus is based on the USS Athena, a purpose-built starship named after the Greek goddess of wisdom.

"I think this was the thing that was challenging for people who had previously developed *Starfleet Academy* projects," admits

Kurtzman, "because it was hard to imagine how cadets could be in danger if they were just in the classroom in San Francisco. Our idea was to say, 'What if you look at it like a teaching hospital?', with a ship that can base itself out of San Francisco, but then can travel into the stars and have the kids learn in the field. When they're teaching med students how to become doctors in *Grey's Anatomy*, they're thrown into real-life or death situations, and that's how they learn. Once we applied that model to it, suddenly it opened up a whole new world."



“If you’re wanting Star Trek to go into another 60 years, you have to let the storytelling evolve”

Thanks to the advanced tech of the 32nd century - where programmable matter and portable transporters are ubiquitous - the Athena also marks a major detour from traditional starship design.

"We're lucky to have a brilliant production designer, Matthew Davies, and an incredible art department, and they took the spirit of both who Athena was, as well as research into the 32nd-century technology that we inherit from *Discovery*," Landau explains. "They came up with the concept that when the Athena goes to warp it unfurls its wings and it flies. Inside the ship, we believe that our atrium set [in Toronto] is the largest set in North America - when you step on to it you really feel like you are on a giant Federation ship."

THE ONGOING MISSION

But that fancy vessel may not be *Starfleet Academy*'s biggest departure from previous voyages. In contrast to the more homogeneous *Star Wars* and *Marvel* universes, the new show continues modern *Trek*'s tradition of experimentation within the franchise's established parameters. Indeed, for all the references to past adventures - exocomps, the Doctor's passion for opera - there's a sense of this youth-focused series going where no *Trek* has gone before.

"My philosophy has always been that each show needs to be its own unique colour in the





Caleb Mir (right) is searching for his mother.



Oded Fehr's Admiral Vance (right) is back.

same rainbow," says Kurtzman. "They all need to tell their own unique story. I don't believe that it's really possible to create a one-size-fits-all *Star Trek* show. We've discovered, for example, that there's a whole audience of younger kids who've found *Star Trek* through *Lower Decks*, and that's led them to the other shows and movies. The goal, over time, is you have to plan different shows for different people, with the assumption they're all a gateway drug in some way! That's a really nice thing, because it makes *Trek* a limitless story engine."

Beyond *Starfleet Academy* (which is already shooting its second season), there are two more seasons of *Strange New Worlds* in the pipeline, and then there's the small matter of the franchise's 60th anniversary in September.

"There's quite a few exciting things in the works right now," Kurtzman teases, "but I'm not going to say more than that!" (He's similarly tight-lipped about future projects,

though since our interview it's been confirmed that *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves* directors Jonathan Goldstein and John Francis Daley are developing a new *Star Trek* film.)

Kurtzman is well aware, however, that a major part of his role involves future-proofing the franchise to ensure it's still boldly going another 60 years from now.

"For me, *Star Trek* always has to hew back towards that central vision of optimism," he tells us. "The minute it betrays that it's not *Star Trek* any more, but as long as that is always our north star, I think there's a lot of room [to try new things]. If you're wanting *Star Trek* to go into another 60 years, you're going to have to let the storytelling evolve – otherwise it freezes in time and

becomes no longer relevant."

"What has made *Star Trek* enduring is that everyone has a seat at the table in the story," adds Landau. "The vision of *Star Trek* is one where we all sit down despite our differences – in fact we sit down because of our differences. *Star Trek* has always opened its arms to everyone and said, 'You will see yourself in this story no matter who you are,' and we continue to do that."

Star Trek: Starfleet Academy is on Paramount+ from 15 January.



WHAT'S UP, DOC?

Karim Diané plays a Klingon on an unlikely career path

Klingons are traditionally known for their warrior tendencies. Do you feel like you're exploring new territory with Jay-Den Kraag, a cadet who wants to be a doctor? Absolutely not. I feel like this may be the first time that we're seeing on screen a Klingon who is this different. But from what I understand, the Klingons – like any community – don't just have warriors. Healers have always been there.

How have you found wearing the character's prosthetics?

It has been a very challenging process. I'd never done anything like this before and you really don't know what it will be like until you sit down for five, six hours transforming. It's tough to do on a daily basis, and I talked to Michael Dorn [Worf in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*] and Doug Jones [Star Trek: Discovery's Saru] because I was seeking help from anyone who had experience of this. But it was also the most rewarding experience, because the result is this really awesome-looking character.

What about coping with the Klingon language?

About two weeks before we started filming, Alex Kurtzman called me and he's like, "We want you to drop your voice, like, 10 octaves!" My transformation wasn't just physical, because I had to learn how to speak [puts on deep Jay-Den voice] all the way down here. I had a language coach to help me speak Klingon. I didn't know it's a language people speak in real life and you can learn it on Duolingo! But I speak other languages, so I guess I'm used to different ways of moving your mouth and tongue. I can't say I speak Klingon fluently, though – don't quiz me!



WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD

THE PARTY ENDS

THE DUFFER BROTHERS AND THEIR CAST HAVE BEEN WORKING ON **STRANGER THINGS** FOR THE BEST PART OF A DECADE – AND NOW, THE SHOW FINALLY COMES TO AN END. THEY REFLECT ON THE FINAL TABLE READ, THE LAST DAY ON SET, AND THE FRIENDSHIPS THAT WILL LAST A LIFETIME.



M

**ATT DUFFER
(co-creator):**

The first emotional moment was writing the final script, because it was Ross and me writing these characters for the last time ever. Writing Mike's last line, then Steve's last line, it was hard. But that was nothing compared to what it felt like shooting the last day. The last day of production was one of the most emotional days of our lives. It's been a quarter of our lives. It was hard for the cast, too, because they've been with this show for half their lives. I think Millie [Bobby Brown, who played Eleven] doesn't even remember life before *Stranger Things*.

Sadie Sink (Max Mayfield): I remember at the table read, I didn't think I would be emotional. But then, of course, we were all crying at the end of it, because it was the last new script we were ever going to read. Then just getting to that final page, and it's saying, "End of *Stranger Things*", it was like, "That's right, this is it." Then the last day was one of the most important and memorable days of my life. It was so weird. It wasn't emotional, but we were all very on edge, like we were having fun, and soaking it up, just being really present. But we all were just like, doomed. By the end of that day, we were like, "Oh God, we know this was coming..."

Gaten Matarazzo (Dustin Henderson): The last day of filming was kind of crazy, because seemingly everybody who had ever worked on that show was there. The soundstage was absolutely packed, and all of our parents were invited to come back, which I was so happy about. It was just such a huge day. All hugs and gifts, and they had clearly set up for festivities afterwards. There was this big tarp on the ceiling that was clearly holding a plethora of balloons for when the announcement was made that there was a wrap on the show. Because of all of that around it, it didn't really feel like a day on set. It felt like the last day of school, where you're not actually hunkered down and learning for the day. You're not focused, but you're running around. Especially in elementary school, you play games and there are treats and you are going into summer. It kind of felt like that a little bit, and it was a lot of fun. →

Finn Wolfhard (Mike Wheeler): Because the crew is so big on the show, a lot of crew work off set – they work in the more administrative departments – and this was finally the moment where all that work was done. They were all on set with us, we were all in the studio, so everyone came. Not only was the crew there, but also people from their offices came in, and it was just hundreds of people that I had met for the first time. So it was just this amazing moment, kind of like school, where everyone was like, “Hey, how’s it going?” It was this amazing moment, this full-circle thing.

Caleb McLaughlin (Lucas Sinclair): It was weird because it was the second-to-last day that was the weirdest. The last day was weird, but it was like, “Oh, let’s do this, and hold hands, and hang out.” But the second-to-last day, I almost felt scared, because this was our very last second-to-last day. I remember seeing everyone like, “Oh, man, I’m trying to play this, but am I going to cry or am I going to try to hold it in and act like I’m not a crybaby and try to be a man about this?” I couldn’t hold it together. It was a lot of emotions. It was really sad, I’m not going to lie, just looking at everyone’s faces and seeing the child versions of themselves. It was like a movie where all the kids grow up, and then you see their adult versions, and then they transform to the kid versions. I was hallucinating that I saw the younger version of Noah [Schnapp] and then

“I’ll always be a part of it, and it will forever influence what I do for the rest of my life”



Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) has been in the wars...



With co-stars Winona Ryder (Joyce) and Maya Hawke (Robin).

Charlie [Heaton, aka Jonathan] and Natalia [Dyer, who played Nancy]. Everyone was on set. It was just like, we were really done.

Noah Schnapp (Will Byers): The last day on set I’ll never forget, just because of how emotional it was. That whole day was just brutal, because none of us wanted it to end. Then at the end, we were like, “You know what? This is something we’re going to do just for us, and we’re not going to tell anyone.” It was really special. It was so emotional because everyone came. All our parents were there. I’ll never forget. I remember it so vividly – I think it’ll stay with me for the rest of my life.

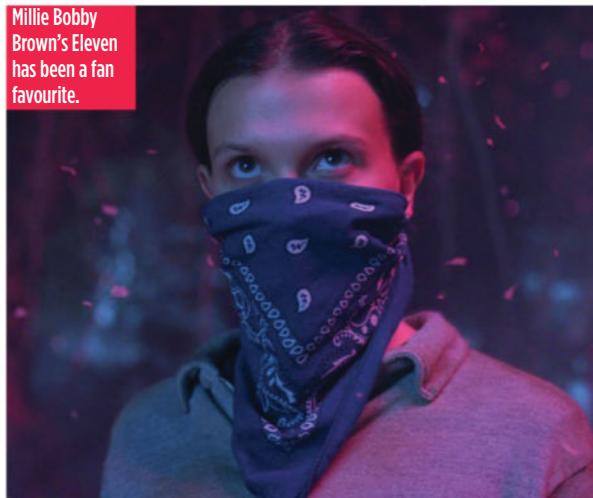
Nell Fisher (Holly Wheeler): My last day of filming was the last day of filming – it was the final day. I got really emotional because I’ve been there for a year, but I know there have been people who’ve been on this show for a decade, and it’s really been a defining part of their childhood, and they’re now growing up. So many people have worked so hard to make this show the amazing show that it is, and it was really emotional to see it all coming to an end, but the Duffers have ended it so perfectly.

Finn Wolfhard: I think the finale is one of the best things – one of the best finales of a show. I’m incredibly excited for people to see it.

Gaten Matarazzo: What’s been hard to settle into is that this really is the end. We’ve been on it for so long, and people want more of our characters, but the Duffers are like, “No, thanks.” That’s been hard. I don’t know necessarily if it’s the end of this world; I don’t know about the lore of the universe; I don’t know what Matt and Ross are cooking up. They probably want to take 10 steps back and get some distance from it for a while, which they deserve. I don’t know how I’d be involved in any capacity, but for the time being, it’s



Co-showrunner Matt Duffer on location for the fifth season.



Millie Bobby Brown's Eleven has been a fan favourite.



Will (Noah Schnapp) was trapped in the Upside Down.



Season five was one of extremes for Max (Sadie Sink).



Nell Fisher's Holly Wheeler went missing this season...



Breakthrough star Caleb McLaughlin as Lucas.

wrapped up for me, which is a bummer. I love the show. I love making it. I love watching it. I love getting to say I've been a part of it, and I love the process of doing it. But that's the only thing that ends. I'll always be a part of it, and it will forever influence what I do for the rest of my life, as an actor and as a person.

Shawn Levy (executive producer): It's surreal that it's coming to an end. It's very emotionally loaded, because this show not only changed Netflix, it changed television culture, it changed the lives of all of us who made it. The connection that the Duffers and myself and our cast and crew [made], that's a lifetime connection. There's no way to describe the impact of this show on the lives of those who made it, but if you're one of those people, you

understand, and that shared form of intimacy and connection, that is forever.

Matt Duffer: Even though we're hopeful that some of us are going to work together again on other projects, it will never be with this exact ensemble, so the show ending is bittersweet in the fact that everybody is excited to move on to the next chapter of their lives. Everyone's excited to tell new stories. But it's really sad to leave these characters in this world behind, and the cast aren't just saying goodbye to these characters that they helped bring to life – they're saying goodbye to this show and, in so many ways, their friends. Not that they're not going to still be friends, but not in the same way. At the end of every other season, everyone is so exhausted you feel like you're going to collapse. Everyone's almost relieved to go home and you're saying it doesn't feel that sad, because you're going to see everybody again in a year. So knowing that you're not going to see each other again in a year, it was tough.

Noah Schnapp: It doesn't feel like the very end as we have this whole press tour ahead of us, and the show coming out. The world hasn't even seen it yet. So to me, it's so far from over. There's still the whole world's experience of it. Then, when that's over, then I'm going to be like, "Oh..." But not yet. I definitely feel like the

friendship with the other cast members is going to last. I am sure we'll be friends for life.

Gaten Matarazzo: I was talking about this specifically with some of the gang. I don't think there's a possibility of us not being close. We were making this from when I was 13 to 22, and those are the most formative years of your life, and to have them centred around something so spectacular as this show and to share it with my favourite people in the world... I love these guys so much, and I miss them. I miss seeing them as much as I got to during the process of filming, but already what I've noticed is that we've been seeing each other a bunch already, and we've been able to continuously spend time with each other and communicate on a consistent basis. We can just water the garden that is our friendship with each other. It would be harder not to remain close than it would be to stay close. I'm really stoked to continue growing with them and knowing them and hopefully working with them. I know it's so hard to picture what's next, and a lot of times, other people have probably not worked with people like we did, doing a decade of the same thing. But I don't care: I would act with these guys forever if I could. They're such a great group and I love them very, very, very much. ●

Stranger Things is on Netflix.

RETURN TO SILENT HILL

TOXIC WASTE

RETURN TO
SILENT HILL?
YOU MUST
BE INSANE...

WORDS:
NICK SETCHFIELD



RETURN TO SILENT HILL

Christophe Gans is coming home.

Like so many souls before him he's been lured back to the nightmarish environs of Silent Hill. It's the town that burns forever, after all.

But for once the vision didn't come in some fogbound dream, crawling with deviant, demonic entities. Gans felt the call during the existential tedium of lockdown, shortly after his true dream – a movie adaptation of Italian adventure comic *Corto Maltese* – had crumbled with the death of long-time production partner Samuel Hadida, financial architect of the project.

"The pandemic came and I didn't know what to do," says Gans, who first brought the fiendishly immersive survival game to the big screen in 2006. "I knew that we still had the rights to *Silent Hill*, so during the lockdown I decided to spend the time trying to adapt the very difficult-to-adapt *Silent Hill 2*!"

Originally released for PlayStation in 1999, *Silent Hill* is a phenomenon, a gaming franchise that's sold over 13 million copies globally – an incalculable amount of shudders, screams and sweat-slicked gamepads. Created by Keiichiro Toyama and Konami's Team Silent, it plunges players into a rural American ghost town where reality bleeds into a hellish, hallucinatory otherworld. The vibe is unsettling, the imagery intoxicatingly creepy, a grimy aesthetic of rust and emptiness, flaking walls and flayed flesh.

While 25 years' worth of sequels, spinoffs and remakes have expanded the franchise, Gans – a genuine fan, who lobbied Konami for the rights to make the first film – always had his mind on 2001's *Silent Hill 2*. In fact, it's the game he wanted to transform into cinema in the first place.

"Samuel and I wanted to do the second one

“The first film was very operatic. This one is psychological and in a strange way romantic”

because the second one was the best, and also it was a fan favourite," he tells SFX. "But after a moment we realised it was maybe too big to swallow, because we had to create a town, to define the rules of this world, this lore. And the story of *Silent Hill 2* was so complex, because we are seeing all the story through the point of view of the main character. So it's a very twisted way to tell the story. It's almost like a Roman Polanski movie, like *Repulsion*. We realised that maybe it was safer to start with the first game and push the adaptation of the second game to later.

"And also for me it was important that so much time has passed between the two films. If you know the games, the second game is almost a betrayal of the first. In the first game Silent Hill does exist. It's like a *Twilight Zone*, a different dimension. But in the second one, Silent Hill is



James is on a mission. Below: Laura (Evie Templeton).

happening in the twisted mind of the main character. When you play the two games you realise they are not defined by the same rules. So I decided that *Return To Silent Hill* will not be a sequel, more like a reboot, a much more complex reboot, simply because everything is seen through the point of view of a madman."

MAD WORLD

Gans passed on directing the actual sequel to the first film, 2012's 3D misfire *Silent Hill: Revelation*. "For me it's very important not to repeat the first film. It's why I didn't do the second one. They asked me to basically do the same film with the second one and they also wanted a different type of pace. They wanted something closer to *Resident Evil*. They wanted to make a franchise... They wanted the *Rocky II* of *Silent Hill* and I said no."

For Gans, an adaptation of *Silent Hill 2* has finally found its moment. The game's internal focus reflects the way horror cinema has grown over the past couple of decades, he argues.

"I saw a very interesting evolution of the genre, especially from the moment when we saw movies like *Hereditary*, *Midsommar*, *It Follows*, *The Witch*... Suddenly the horror genre was changing and I was thinking that maybe it was a good thing that we pushed the adaptation [to later]. *Return To Silent Hill* plays on a different level of perception, which is one of the main things that we see in this new trend of horror film, the fact that what you are seeing is not necessarily happening. I think it's very exciting."

"And I think the audience has evolved in that direction. They want to be surprised. There was a moment when it was interesting to surprise the audience with a storytelling twist, like



Pyramid Head debuted in seminal game *Silent Hill 2*.

in an M Night Shyamalan movie, but people are expecting something even more bizarre, by twisting the point of view, by twisting the reality.

"It makes horror a very adult and transgressive genre again. As a fan of horror films I was thinking that all the movies coming after 2000 were very conservative. It was just a jump-scare feast. Now we are seeing the return of the disturbing aspect of the horror film and it's much more interesting. As a European guy, of course, I do prefer that type of horror!"

Yes, here's a Frenchman, adapting a Japanese game about an American town – and making it in East Europe. That's a pretty intriguing mix of perspectives, SFX suggests.

"For me, the genre is like the Gulf Stream, you know?" Gans laughs. "It travels all over the globe. I spent a lot of time talking with one of the main creators of *Silent Hill*, Akira





The town has been overrun with terrifying creatures.

Yamaoka, who's done the music for this film. He told me all the influences he had. It was Lucio Fulci, it was *The Shining*, it was *Jacob's Ladder*. It's interesting, because we are more or less the same age, and I realised that when he was a teen he was loving the same films that I was in the South of France. That's what I like in genre film. You can watch in a different part of the world, simply because it takes the best from every corner of this planet. That's a process which has always astonished me."

Return To Silent Hill is, says Gans, "a mad love story". Following the premise of *Silent Hill 2*, it finds a man named James Sunderland heading to the town in search of his lost love, Mary. As his mind fractures along with reality, James realises he has entered a distinctly personal hell.

There are mythological echoes here, Gans tells *SFX*. "The first film was very operatic. This one is much more psychological and in a way strangely romantic, because it's about a man obsessed by a woman. For me, the story of the game is loosely an adaptation of the legend of Orpheus, going to Hell to take back Eurydice, his beloved bride."

"James is like Orpheus. He's a poet. In the game it's not defined what he's doing with his life, so I decided to make him a painter. That's interesting because you can understand why he's transforming the world like that, simply because he's an artist. Even if his mind is twisted there's a strange beauty, a strange harmony in what he's imagining. The poets in Greek mythology are making the link between the world of humans and the world of the gods, and James is able to translate from one world to the other."

PAINTER MAN

James is played by Jeremy Irvine, best known for *War Horse* and *Treadstone*. For Gans, it's a choice that brings a fitting touch of rock star to the role. A rider on the storm, no less. Brain squirming like a toad? Check.

"I'm a fan of The Doors. I was imagining James like Jim Morrison, opening the doors of perception, and that's Orpheus. Orpheus is playing the harp and singing in the old Greek mythology. I was thinking, 'Yeah, a modern-day Orpheus could be Jim Morrison.'

"Jeremy succeeded in bringing an arc to the



James (Jeremy Irvine) ends up trapped in a nightmare.

character. What I like is that he starts like a nice, candid character and in the last third of the film he finishes as someone very dark and not so sane. I like the way he has built this very slow change into his mood. I noted that when we were editing the film. He did a very good job, because it's difficult to be alone on the screen, in a ghost town, playing only fear and the obsession for a woman – but a woman who's not there! He did something really cool."

Jigsaw's Hannah Emily Anderson is Mary – and, as James discovers, an unsettling doppelganger named Maria.

"I saw her in a strange Canadian thriller where she was playing a lesbian serial killer [2018's *What Keeps You Alive*]," Gans shares. "At one moment she was changing her personality in one shot. I watched her performance and said, 'Oh my god, that girl is amazing. She can do it. She can be Mary but she can also be Maria.'"

As well as Pyramid Head – the franchise's sword-wielding, iron-masked mascot – *Return To Silent Hill* populates the old town with some scary new entities. "All these creatures are actually the twisted reflections of what happened to James and Mary, and especially Mary. Most of the monsters in this film are feminine, because they are reflecting the horrible agony of Mary. I think people will be interested to suddenly realise that these creatures are not simple monsters. They are a twisted state of mind."

Silent Hill has left its mark, searing its zip code into popular culture. Music videos have appropriated its industrial-terror aesthetic, while the Duffer Brothers openly acknowledge it as an inspiration for the Upside Down in *Stranger Things*. As Gans discovered, these days everyone's a visitor.

"When I did the first film, I had to explain the rules of *Silent Hill*. When I arrived on set, nobody had played it. But on this one, everyone has played it. When I cast Hannah and Jeremy, I told them, 'Okay, now I'm going to explain how *Silent Hill* works...' And they said, 'No, we don't need it! We saw the first film when we were young!' I said, 'My God, finally I'm working with a second generation of *Silent Hill* fans!'

"In 20 years everything has changed. For young people today their classics come more from videogames or manga than literature or old cinema. That's the new culture."

Return To Silent Hill is in cinemas from 23 January.

28 YEARS LATER:
THE BONE TEMPLE

RAGE ON

THE BEST ZOMBIE
FRANCHISE OF THIS
CENTURY IS BACK, AND IT
SHOWS NO SIGNS OF
SLOWING DOWN.
DIRECTOR NIA DACOSTA
TELLS SFX ABOUT
PUTTING HER OWN STAMP
ON THE ICONIC SERIES IN
**28 YEARS LATER:
THE BONE TEMPLE**

WORDS:
MATT MAYTUM





T WASN'T QUITE 28 YEARS IN real time, but there was a hell of a wait for the third film in the series that revived zombies' big-screen fortunes, once again making them scary and giving them something to say. *28 Days Later* was unleashed by director Danny Boyle and screenwriter Alex Garland in 2002, though the duo had less involvement with the (decent) 2007 sequel *28 Weeks Later*. They reunited, however, for 2025's legacy threequel *28 Years Later*, a critical smash that focused on a small band of survivors living on the island of Lindisfarne. For all the carnage on display, it was post-Brexit Britain that got the biggest savaging.

Well, you wait decades for a Rage-infected sequel, then two come along almost at once. *28 Years Later: The Bone Temple* hits cinemas a mere seven months after the most recent instalment, and it's a good thing too, given that the last one ended on a jaw-dropping coda that simply had to be followed up on. *The Bone Temple* is the second chapter in a proposed three-part story. Garland wrote all three, but Danny Boyle would not be directing this one, so fresh blood was needed.

Nia DaCosta – who previously directed 2021's *Candyman* reboot and the MCU's *The Marvels* – was deep in post-production on passion project *Hedda*, "having the time of my life", when she got the call from her agent. She'd asked not to be sent anything new, so didn't read it.

"Then the next day, Alex Garland called me and he's like, 'Hey, so we're making the movies, but Danny's only doing the first one, so we're looking for someone for the second,'" she tells *SFX*. "That weekend, I read the scripts – the first and the second scripts – and I just thought they were absolutely brilliant. Also, the idea of coming into a second film after Danny fucking Boyle is insane, but the scripts were so different that I thought, 'Oh, I can actually make my own movie here.'"

At a preliminary meeting, DaCosta pitched Garland and Boyle her take. "I said, 'Here's what I think. I'm not gonna try to make a Danny Boyle movie. That is, one, impossible, and two, not creatively interesting for me. But here's how I see the film. Here's what I love about it, and here's how I would want to do it.' And they bought into it." The finished film is exactly the one she described in that meeting, she says.

CULTURE SHOCK

Back in the early '00s, DaCosta had watched *28 Days Later* – in which the ultra-contagious Rage virus spreads, turning much of the British public into sprinting, flesh-hungry zombies – over and over again. "I could probably talk you through the entire film, scene by scene for ➤

sure," she laughs. "Maybe shot by shot. It was hugely important to me. And it wasn't just... because I always loved horror and being scared, but it was sort of me realising, 'Oh, you can make a horror film that feels authored. You can make a horror film that feels like [it's about] more than just trying to scare you.'"

The Bone Temple has plenty to say across its two main narrative strands. One follows "the Jimmys", a brutal gang led by cult leader Jimmy Crystal (Jack O'Connell), in which every member is styled after Jimmy Savile, with tracksuits and white wigs – as briefly introduced in the aforementioned coda. There's also the continuing story of Ralph Fiennes's Dr Kelson, and his mission to study Infected alpha Samson (Chi Lewis-Parry). The *memento mori* skeleton structure Kelson has built – seen in *28 Years Later* – gives this film its title.

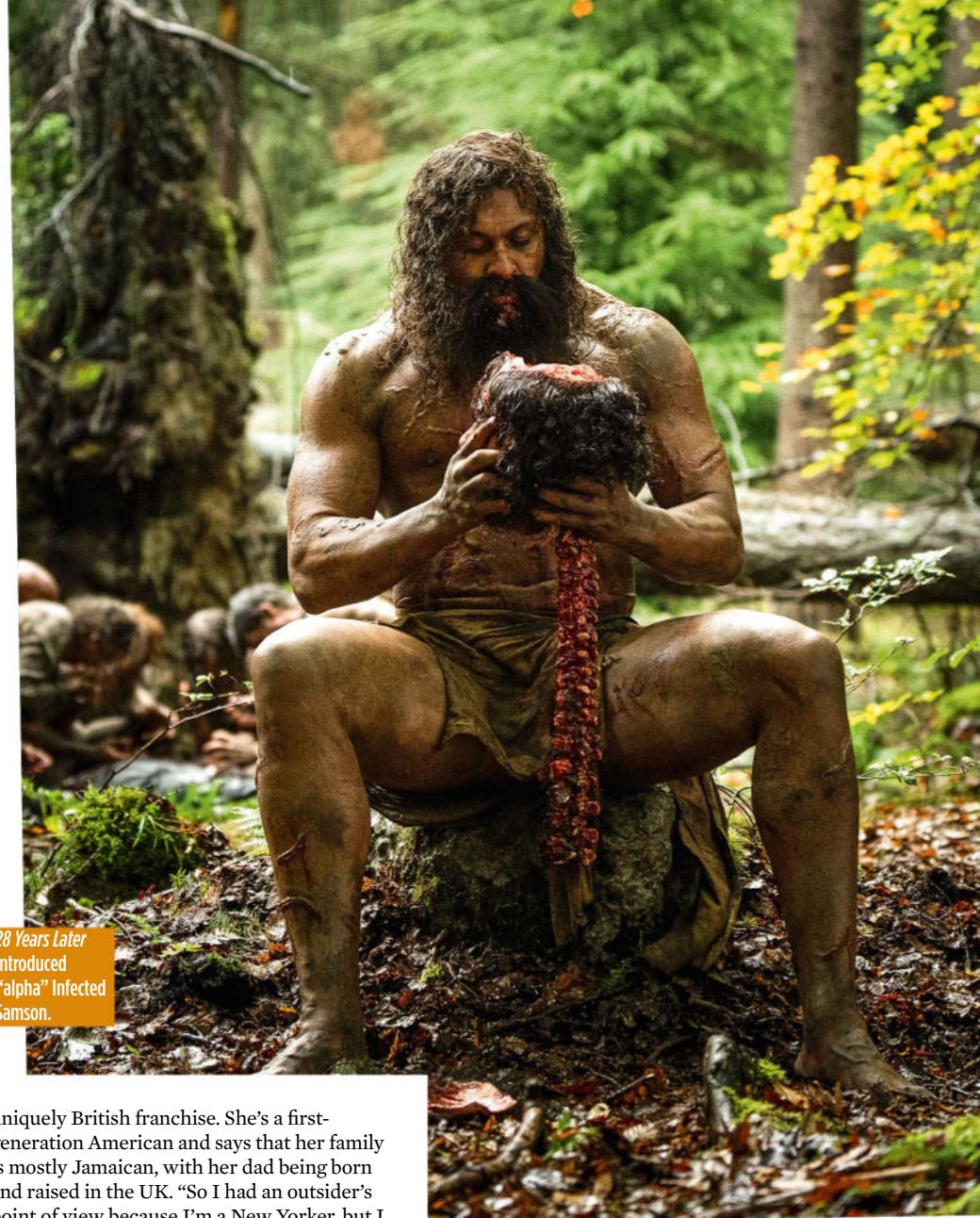
The shooting of Boyle and DaCosta's films didn't quite cross over – there were three weeks in between – but DaCosta says she had plenty of input while Boyle was prepping his film, as key elements would straddle both chapters. When it came to casting in particular,

“They are human beings who are accessing a part of humanity we all have”

DaCosta explains "the rule of thumb was, if it was mostly Danny's movie, that's his purview. If it was mostly mine, that's mine. Of course, he's a producer on all the films, so obviously we were in dialogue, but he was never like, 'You can't do that. You have to do this.' It was always a conversation, and as a director himself who has a very distinctive vision, I think he knew and didn't want to stymy my vision, which I really appreciated. But also, we really were in lockstep a lot of the time."

One of Boyle's requests was that some of the people who were cast as Jimmys be able to do physically impressive things. "I was like, 'Oh, okay. I mean, why?'" DaCosta recalls with a laugh. "And then you see why. 'Oh, okay.'" She's referring, of course, to the coda to *28 Years Later*, in which young Spike (Alfie Williams) is saved from a horde of Infected by a bunch of Jimmy Savile impersonators with makeshift weapons and ninja skills. Not only was it bonkers and unexpected; it was extremely provocative, particularly for British people living under the spectre of the late TV presenter, whose heinous crimes were revealed after his death in 2011.

DaCosta – who now lives in the UK – brings an outsider's perspective to this



uniquely British franchise. She's a first-generation American and says that her family is mostly Jamaican, with her dad being born and raised in the UK. "So I had an outsider's point of view because I'm a New Yorker, but I also had this lifetime of, y'know, peripheral Britishness around me, which is a really fun and interesting place to be."

While it's hard not to imagine the Savile component stirring up a huge amount of discourse in the UK, DaCosta downplays that part of the film. "I was also living in England when [the Savile news] all came out," she says. "But interestingly in the script... I didn't think about that at all, because it's just not a part of my marrow in the way I think it might be for people who grew up with him as a person. But also I think, to be honest, the script's not about him or that. It's really the trauma of Jimmy

[Crystal] as a child [that] takes in all of these sorts of figures like him and these childhood memories – the Teletubbies – and perverts them. So that, I think, is really what that's about, as

opposed to commentary on [Savile] as the horrible monster that he is." In the timeline of this world, Savile's crimes would've never been uncovered, either.

"A lot of things that we have started to take for granted because of being here, that hasn't happened there. So it's quite an interesting sliding doors thing."

HUMAN NATURE

O'Connell is known for his intensity, and is on a particularly hot streak at the moment, after having also been a standout in *Sinners*. "He's really focused," DaCosta says of his on-set approach, but he also looked out for the younger actors playing his acolytes. "He's a fun, caring presence on set, but then can switch gears into this horrific maniac as well."

What DaCosta calls the "heart" of the story is the strand following Kelson and the hulking Infected alpha Samson. "I remember reading the script for the first time and my jaw just dropping a couple of times as it relates to [Samson] and to Kelson... I just thought, how exciting to read something so different and unexpected, but also how cool to have this character and engage in something that I like to think about a lot, which is humanity and knowing oneself, and this line between nature





Director Nia DaCosta on set with some of the Jimmys.



The first film's bone temple takes on new prominence.



and nurture and all of these things. So it was just really exciting for me to dig into that character and that relationship."

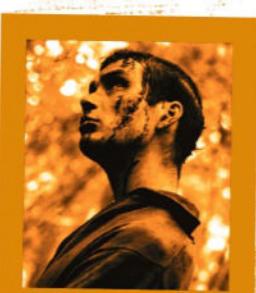
In the Jimmys strand, there's some frightening savagery. For DaCosta, it was important to have that contrast between "this beauty that Kelson's managed to wrest from

this terrible situation" and "the horrific, violent, mercurial, erratic world of the Jimmys. So they had to be equal to each other, as beautiful and as bloody as the other." With the threat of the human characters almost scarier than the Infected, it's tempting to wonder if there's a "humans are the real monsters" theme embedded in *The Bone Temple*. DaCosta's own view is more nuanced, though.

"What we work [through] with Samson is the monsters are also humans, and that's kind of the thing," she explains. "The monsters have a virus; they're infected. But the whole conceit is not that they've been turned into literal unhuman things. They are human beings who are accessing a part of humanity that we all have. So I find that really interesting. Then to have humans who are not infected, engaging in that sort of brutality is, I think, really interesting. I definitely love the dichotomy of that, and it's kind of why I like horror overall."

With DaCosta's movie completed, the next step for the franchise is for Boyle to return to helm the planned final instalment. Where that goes could be another hard left turn; DaCosta hasn't been privy to any info on the next film. "That's top secret," she smiles. "That's all [Boyle and Garland]. I wish them the best of luck and I cannot wait to see it." ●

The Bone Temple is in cinemas from 16 January.



MURPHY'S LAW

The return of Cillian to the Later-verse

When promoting *28 Years Later*, Danny Boyle confirmed that the star of the first film, Cillian Murphy – who played survivor Jim – would return in *The Bone Temple*, ahead of being "a huge part of the third movie". The first trailer for *28 Years Later* caused some viewers to mistakenly think he was playing the zombie with killer cheekbones, which was quickly debunked. DaCosta is not giving much away about Murphy's reappearance; when *SFX* mentions that Boyle let the cat out of the bag, she smiles, "I know, I was like, 'Shhhh!'"

But she will talk about what it was like working with the Irish actor. "He is really great. I mean, *28 Days Later*, that's the first time I saw him and I was like, 'First of all, I'm marrying him when I'm older...'" she laughs. "Then secondly, obviously as an adult and as the person who I became once [I understood] my love of film and wanted to be a director, his performances that he turned in year after year were so inspiring, so interesting. And I've always wanted to work with him. So fresh off the heels of his Oscar [for *Oppenheimer*], I got him on set, which is really, really a joy."

WE BURY THE DEAD



DEAD AND HAVING IT

AUSTRALIAN DIRECTOR ZAK HILDITCH SPINS A NEW ZOMBIE YARN FROM GRIEF AND SHAME IN
WE BURY THE DEAD

WORDS:
TARA BENNETT

Z

OMBIES HAVE BEEN DONE TO death, pun intended. With George A Romero to *The Walking Dead* and everything in-between, finding a fresh take on undead storytelling is no small feat these days. But Australian writer/director Zak Hilditch found success by going personal in his latest feature, *We Bury The Dead*.

Hilditch tells *SFX* that after losing his mother to breast cancer in 2017, he found himself in the “awful” yet “cathartic” space of packing up her personal belongings in an eerily silent home. The experience stuck with him, and in 2020 he started writing a script with grief as its central theme. →



"I didn't want to make the world's saddest, Debbie Downer of a movie, like a kitchen-sink drama about a dude dealing with the death of his mom," he chuckles. "But, obviously, the filmmaker in me wanted to explore the theme in an interesting, audience-captivating way." Then the idea of a massive critical incident set in a remote area came to him, one that would require volunteers to go in and be part of an assessment and body-clean-up crew.

In his 2013 film *These Final Hours*, Hilditch says, he used genre metaphors to explore his own evolution through typical male immaturity. "In that film, I explored the male gaze, which was a much more good-looking, physically agile version of myself in [actor] Nathan Phillips," he says light-heartedly. "It asked, 'What would you do in the last hour on Earth?' It was about me saying goodbye to my twenties and hello to my thirties.

"With this, I wanted to explore from the female point of view," he explains. "And the idea of never getting to start the family you thought you had all the time in the world to do. It was such a potent thing for her to be female and to have not gotten the chance to start that other phase of her life because the rug was pulled away from her in the cruellest of ways. So from day one, it was always a character named Ava Newman doing the [clean-up] job, coming to find out what happened to her husband."

He continues, "A female point of view in this film allowed me to explore so many more perils and so many more dangers," he says of the journey that Ava undertakes. "She ends up flying to the epicentre of the catastrophe in Tasmania because it's near the corporate retreat her husband was attending, and she's lost all contact with him.

"And then one day, I was like, 'Dare I actually make some of these things come back?'" Hilditch says of how zombies eventually entered the story. "What would happen?"

"I didn't want to add zombies just because," he emphasises. "I wanted it to really mean something. You can't just add zombies. You had better have something new and interesting to say. So this idea of unfinished business and



Daisy Ridley's Ava is searching for her lost husband.



It was vital to the filmmakers that revenants remain distinctive.



Ol' blue eyes: Tasmania is overrun with the undead.

grief, if I could explore that through the zombies as well, I thought I really had something. It was a very primal thing, like Ava having unfinished business and some of these zombies having unfinished business. Once that clicked, I knew I really had something, and we were off to the races."

DEAD SET

Hilditch completed the script and knew its success would be contingent on getting the right actor to play Ava Newman, one who could convey so much in silence, or just physical beats. He sent the script to Daisy Ridley (Rey in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy).

"It's one of those things where you look back, and trying to imagine anyone else pulling off this role is impossible," he muses. "She's just born for this role, and she was the very first actress we went out to."

Hilditch says Ridley and her team came back at lightning speed. "We were Zooming within a week of her reading the script, and in the Zoom, she was telling me that she was all in,"

he remembers. "And I'm just like, 'Did I just hear correctly? Am I *dreaming*?'"

After a year of hard work getting financing, in 2024, Hilditch, Ridley and their crew assembled in Albany, Western Australia, where the entire town gave over every building to the filming of *We Bury The Dead*. "She sort of vouched for the film by even being associated with it," he chuckles. "The whole town was just amazing to us."

It was on location that the director also finally got to live the day-to-day with Ridley and witness the power of her internalisation of his script and this world. "To give your keys to someone like Daisy and know that they're going to absolutely knock it out of the park, I was just watching it and fanning out," he

“To make a zombie movie and then mess the zombies up, you've got no chance in hell”



The movie uses zombies to explore a theme of grief.



DAISY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

Daisy Ridley vanquishes man and beast in *We Bury The Dead*

What was it about the *We Bury The Dead* script that first grabbed your interest?

I have an interest in a lot of different things. I love all sorts of different films. I love all sorts of different books. I don't go into something having a preconceived notion of what the script is going to be, or even if the logline implies that it's a genre. I just let myself enjoy the story. What was funny with this was, I read it and said yes immediately. But I didn't realise that the zombies were as present as they were, because it feels so human and because I think Ava's internal life is mimicking the zombies that she's coming across. It feels so much part of her story that it was funny when I was reminded that it was a genre thing, because in some ways, it didn't feel like that.

The US creates the crisis in the film and Ava is American. Always the case?

It was always scripted. The fact that the Americans are the cause of this, it added an extra feeling of separateness and the feeling that she almost isn't allowed to be as open with how she's feeling because she feels somehow to blame for it. It's *not* her fault, but she is made to feel to blame.

What's at the core of Ava's search?

I really thought a lot about shame and how we all carry shame so heavily. Ava is just shame, covering every part of her.

Ava's journey brings her into contact with two very different men: Clay (Brenton Thwaites) and Riley (Mark Coles Smith). Mark, me and Brenton got on really well. What's funny is, playing Ava was so sad. But I had such a good time on this shoot. I really just can't say enough how amazing the crew were, and the cast were. Shooting in Australia was really amazing.

It's telling that even in a world with zombies, Ava still must navigate the threat of men. Yes, Clay feels trustworthy but the minute Riley comes along, you think, "What?" Seeing the two of them together, there's such a clear distinction between someone you immediately know is OK, and someone you immediately know is absolutely *not* OK. The sequence with Riley felt so different than the rest of the shoot. It is so interesting that Zak created a story full of fear, generally, but absolutely the most frightening thing in the whole film is the real man and the versions of grief that everyone's carrying. For Riley, it's that grief becoming something so fervent that it's sort of intoxicating - and it's understandable - but that's also what's more frightening. Ava does understand where this has come from. She does understand the journey he's taken to end where he ends. But that sequence was so properly scary.

admits. "She's just so riveting to watch on screen. Put a camera on her and get the fuck out of the way."

Hilditch says his other greatest concern - creating believable zombies - was equally assuaged when renowned Australian SFX artist Jason Baird (*Godzilla X Kong: The New Empire*) agreed to take on the challenge. "Without someone like Jason coming on board to oversee that whole side of things, I don't know what we would have done. He was so busy, but he really dug the script and made time really early on to help us develop each one of the key zombies: how they died, what their make-up should be,

and how that was going to make each one uniquely different. To make a zombie movie and then mess the zombies up, you've got no chance in hell. We were very worried about that, but we knew that we were in more than competent hands with him."

What Baird, the FX artists and the sound team did for the film was create an undead that retains some semblances of their humanity, while exhibiting a terrifying, nails-down-a-blackboard teeth-grinding. "Our Riley [character] says that the longer they go on, the more agitated they become when they realise that they're never going to be whole,



The film's zombies will set your teeth on edge...



Ava is part of the team sent in to help after a disaster.

or the same again," Hilditch explaining what in the script inspired their ultimate design. "Once the zombies arrived, that sound could become quite a unique thing throughout the soundtrack of the film. When it came to actually executing that in the mix, I had the *best* team. When they read the script, they're like, 'We can't wait to make that sound!' and they put so much of their soul into getting that sound. As you say with the fingernails on the chalkboard, it was taking it to *that* degree and then backing it off ever so slightly. That's been another great thing about watching the movie with audiences; that teeth sound is a thing that people just can't even deal with!"

As is common with most contemporary horror films, *We Bury The Dead* ends on a note that works either as an end to Ava's story, or as the start of an ongoing mythology. So did Hilditch create it with the idea of having more stories to tell in this world?

"I just love ambiguous endings where they're sort of warranted," he says. "I feel like this was one that was warranted, given what had come before. But, look, I hope the market dictates that there are some answers left for a sequel. We'll wait and see, because I think that would be a pretty cool movie." ●

We Bury The Dead is released in the US on 2 January, and digitally in the UK on 2 February.

DAVID LYNCH



WALLY SKALI/LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY

SURREAL LIVES

IN MEMORY OF DAVID LYNCH, SFX TALKS TO SOME OF THE DIRECTOR'S FELLOW TRAVELLERS ON THE LOST HIGHWAY

WORDS: WILL SALMON

DAVID LYNCH, THE GREAT artist, director, musician and actor, passed away at the start of 2025 at the age of 78. His filmography – which included *Eraserhead*, *Blue Velvet* and *Mulholland Drive*, to name just a few – is legendary, while *Twin Peaks*, which he co-created with writer Mark Frost, brought arthouse cool and movie production values to TV in the early '90s.

Back in September, *SFX* had the pleasure of attending A Gathering Of The Angels: A Tribute To David Lynch in London, where hundreds of fans and friends of the director met for a weekend of talks, screenings and celebrations of his work. In the run-up to the event, we spent time with several of Lynch's key collaborators and asked them about their memories of him.

Our panel is Sabrina Sutherland, executive producer on *Twin Peaks: The Return* and Lynch's long-time collaborator and friend; Michael Horse, who played Deputy Chief Hawk in *Twin Peaks*; Chrystabell, the singer and actor who collaborated on music with David before being cast as Agent Tammy Preston in *Twin Peaks: The Return*; Jake Wardle, who played the green-gloved Freddie Sykes in *Twin Peaks: The Return*; Lesley Dunlop, who played nurse Nora in *The Elephant Man*; and Richard Green, who appeared as the Magician in *Mulholland Drive*'s iconic Club Silencio scene. Notably, all of our interviewees still refer to Lynch in the present tense, a testament to the presence he continues to play in all their lives.

When did you meet David, and what were your first impressions?

Michael Horse: I met him in the '70s. I lived in Topanga Canyon, up in the Santa Monica Mountains, and [fellow Lynch collaborators] Russ Tamblyn and Dean Stockwell were my neighbours. They came over with Dennis Hopper, and they had David with him. I said, "Who's that guy?" And they go, "He's a filmmaker." They showed me his short film, *The Grandmother*, and I went, "Woah!"

Sabrina Sutherland: We met on *Twin Peaks*. He came around and introduced himself, and he was charismatic and super friendly. It wasn't until deep into season two when I had my first real interaction with him, though. I was in

Peaks, which he co-created with writer Mark Frost, brought arthouse cool and movie production values to TV in the early '90s.

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charge of the script distribution and I sent the scripts out, because I had been told they had been approved, but I guess David hadn't approved them. He was screaming down the hall, "Who sent these scripts out?!" So my first real back and forth conversation was him being very upset, but it wasn't long before he said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it." With David there was an anger that could come out at times, but he was always very quick to curtail it and let it go.

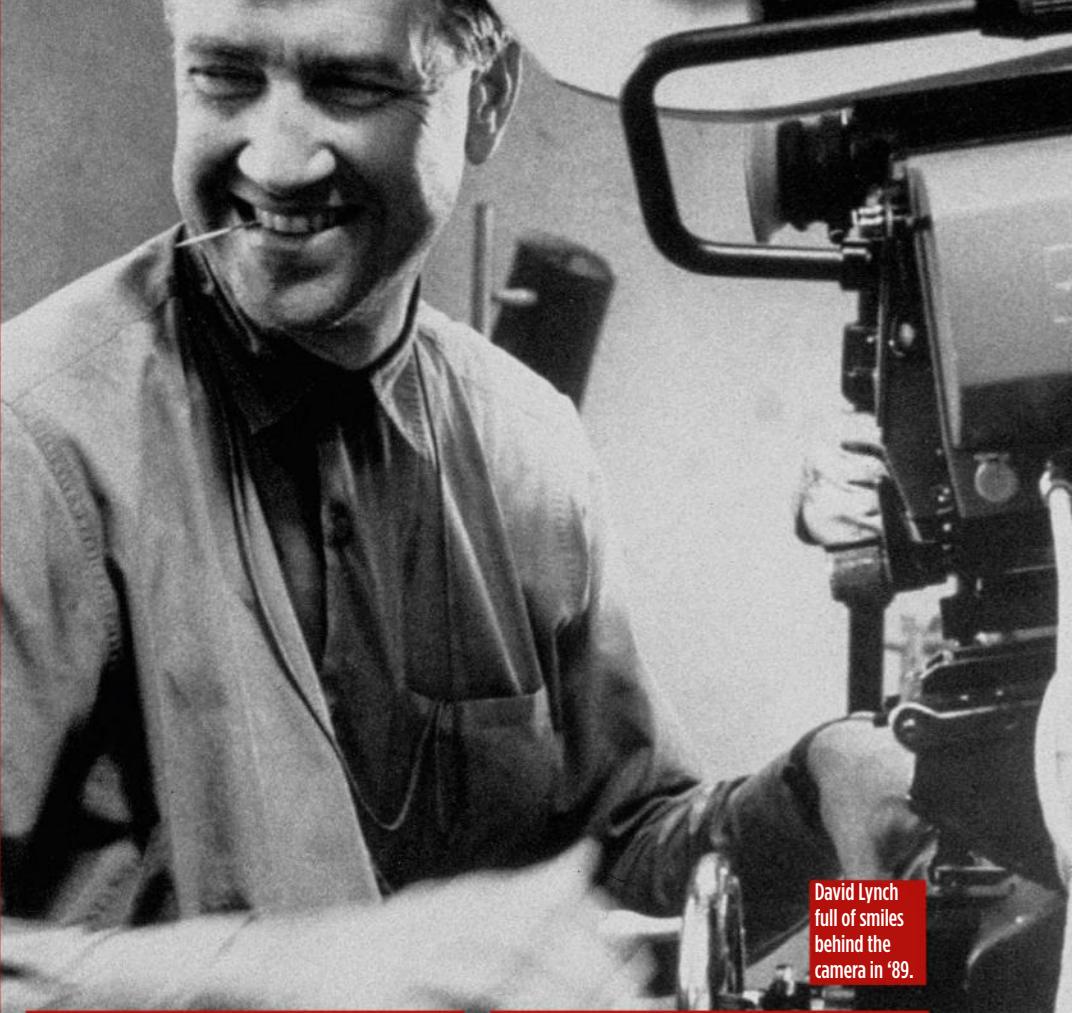
Richard Green: We knew each other, just from hanging out when I was 20 and he was 27 and everybody was drinking a little bit, and I certainly was smoking pot with Jack [Nance]. It was a wonderful time and a very creative period.

Lesley Dunlop: I was on holiday with my older daughter and my baby, who was months old, when I got this call to go up to London for a job [in *The Elephant Man*]. David was extraordinary. He had a

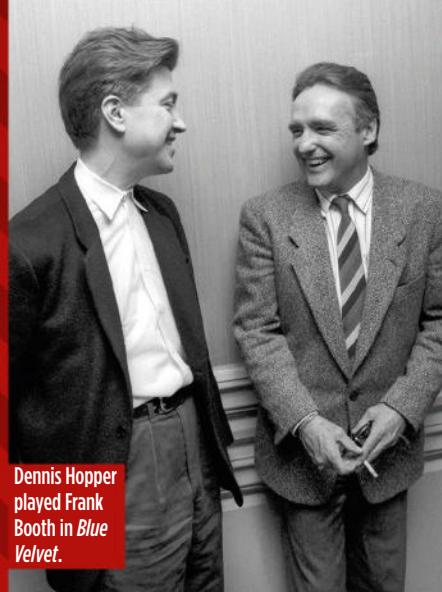
very still quality and he spoke very slowly, a bit like James Stewart. He had that slow drawl, and I remember him telling me that it was going to be in black and white, and it sounded amazing. I just wanted to do it immediately.

Jake Wardle: I made a video [performing various British accents] and it went viral. He saw it and was really impressed, so he got Sabrina [Sutherland] to contact me on YouTube. She dropped

Cast and crew of Lynch's first film project, *Eraserhead*.



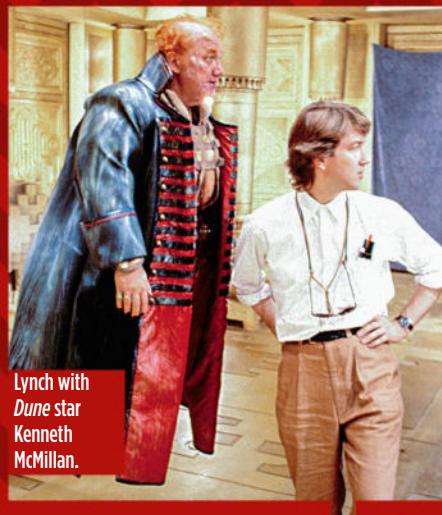
David Lynch full of smiles behind the camera in '89.



Dennis Hopper played Frank Booth in *Blue Velvet*.



John Hurt in prosthetics for his role as John Merrick.



Lynch with *Dune* star Kenneth McMillan.



On set for the *Twin Peaks* film *Fire Walk With Me*.

me a message, like, "Hi, I'm a producer and I work with a director who wants to potentially cast you in one of his films." I didn't really suspect it was a big name until she said, "By the way, the director is David Lynch." I was like, hang on, I've heard that name before... and then I realised that he had directed *The Elephant Man*. I'd seen that as a kid, and also when I did my Year 11 GCSE drama final exam. We did an adaptation of *The Elephant Man*, and they showed us the film in preparation. So we Skyped and it was all just very surreal. He was really chilled and casual, like, "Hey Jake, how ya doing, buddy?"

What was it like working with him?

RG: I hadn't spoken to David in years when I got this phone call where he said he had this role for me [in *Mulholland Drive*]. It was a Friday afternoon and he wanted to shoot it on Monday. At the end of the call, he says, "Oh, and I want it in Spanish and French too, if possible!" So I call a friend of mine who's fluent in French and another in Spanish, and they give me all the options for how to translate this script. I was worried about learning it – it's a three-and-a-half minute monologue, right? But I

“All his direction was minimalist, but he had absolute clarity with what he meant”

learned it and I decided which parts I wanted to be in French, Spanish and English, and what to repeat and when. So when I arrived on the set, I gave it to him. "Here's this thing I put together." And David said, "Okay, let's see it." And that's what we shot. We only shot it twice. There was this very intimate feeling, just this positive trust between us.

LD: It was a magical experience working on *The Elephant Man*. All his direction was minimalist, but he had absolute

clarity with what he meant – I found that anyway, I'm not sure Anthony Hopkins did! You felt so much a part of it. It was like another world being on the set, this brilliant but awful old hospital.

Chrystabell: Communication was one of his artistic abilities, as well as the imbuing and the endowment of confidence. He knows and values the experience of the people he's working with and has just tremendous care and compassion. I think that's how he gets his energy. *Twin Peaks: The Return* was an extraordinary amount of work, an insane endeavour, and he was fuelled, at that time, by Coca Cola and cigarettes and sandwiches made with white bread. I have to believe that he was just made of some other materials, and that the energy that he was emitting and receiving was pristine.

How did working with David compare to other directors?

MH: There were some wonderful directors in the second season [of *Twin Peaks*], but they weren't David. David has a great trust in his actors, and we have a great trust in him. Once in a while he'll tweak something, or he'll say, "Do it again, only good!" He has a thing for pronunciation. He wants every syllable →



With Naomi Watts, making *Mulholland Drive*.

sometimes, but otherwise he just trusts us. That's why he works with the same people over and over.

SSS: Once you work with David Lynch, it's like Before David and After David. When we did *Twin Peaks* season three, we had people who came out of retirement because it's always such a pleasure. You feel like you're really part of something, like you can collaborate and offer suggestions. I've worked with other directors and all they did was scream, or directors who don't know what they want until they see it. David had other challenges, because he liked to experiment and he would come up with ideas on the set, but anything that was scripted and planned, he knew what he wanted months in advance.

***Twin Peaks: The Return* was David's final major screen work, and a mammoth undertaking. What are your memories of working on the show?**

MH: People would ask me, "Is it ever going to come back?" And I thought maybe it shouldn't. I thought part of its mystique was that it died before its time, and had that kind of James Dean thing going for it. I think that if it had come back before 25 years, then it wouldn't have had the impact that it made. David called me up, and he goes, "Hey buddy, we're getting the gang back together." And I said, "Just give me a cameo. I'll do it for free." But they were generous in the amount of work that they gave me. The first day of filming, Kyle [MacLachlan] comes out of the forest with the black make-up on [as the villainous doppelganger Mr C] and he goes, "Hey, Michael, how are you?" And I'm looking at him, like, okay, *Twin Peaks* is back.

C: There's the experience that you have before it's happening, when it's happening, when it's done, when it comes out and all of the reactions and getting through all of that, and then having some perspective. I went from utter shock and disbelief that I would be part of it and that I was acting and not singing – I thought that was ludicrous! – to being able to hold the experience and the, I don't want to say the honour, but

“There was this very intimate feeling, just this positive trust between us”



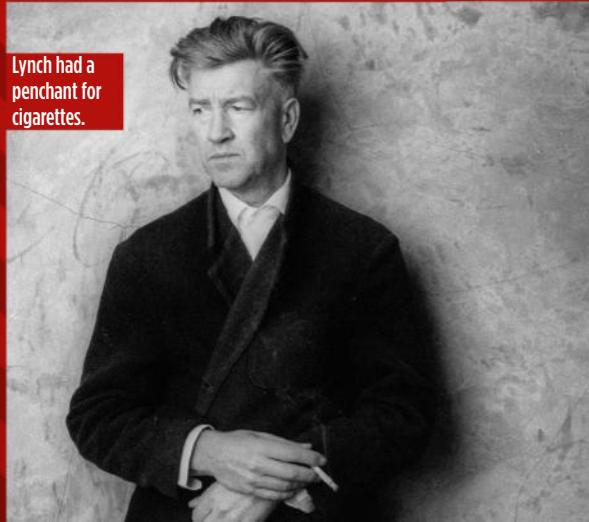
Portraits of Lynch taken in 1986, when he was 40.

somehow, destiny has provided this opportunity. David believes that I can do this thing, and so I can. And then to be able to feel oneself expand beyond what one considered one's limitations in such circumstances was a gift beyond measure.

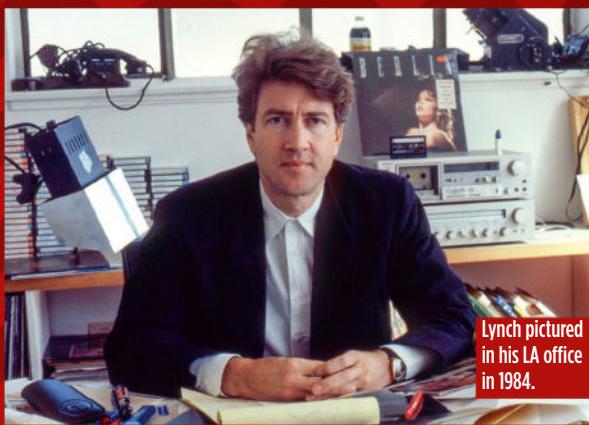
JW: They [the original *Twin Peaks* cast members] all took me under their wing, because not only was I new to *Twin Peaks*, but also new to acting and to being on set. I remember feeling super nervous on my first day, but when we started filming – the scene where I walk into the bar – all that anxiety just vanished. It just melted away and I felt aligned... I was exactly where the universe wanted me to be. I didn't know I was going to be the one to defeat [*Twin Peaks*'s demonic villain] BOB until the day of filming. When I found out, I was like, "Okay, what's this?" David sat me down and explained it, and I was like, "BOB? He's

like the main villain." And David's like, "Yeah!" Whoa. I wasn't expecting that. What an honour!

SSS: It was a big challenge, but it was the best job I've ever had in my life. I got to work so closely with David, and really see what makes him tick and how he works. Gosh, what a joy. David wanted it to be his vision throughout. He wanted to



Lynch had a penchant for cigarettes.



Lynch pictured in his LA office in 1984.



He had a relationship with Isabella Rossellini.



Lynch and Kyle MacLachlan on the set of *Blue Velvet*.

shoot it like a feature film. It was hard to get Showtime to wrap their heads around that, but they came around, and then they were behind us 110%. It was really a wonderful thing that Showtime did, allowing David to have this creative control. David and I worked on it for, gosh, probably a year before we even went into pre-production. And then other people came in for about six months, and then we shot it, which took another nine or 10 months, and then we were in post-production for another year and a half, or however long. It was certainly not traditional television. David was hands-on with everything. All of it had David's stamp on it, every frame.

Do you have any closing thoughts?

MH: David is an abstract artist. You're watching these things that hit you deep inside your psyche and do different



THE LIVES AND LOVES OF A LOG LADY

Richard Green on his documentary about Catherine E Coulson

Richard Green is well known for playing The Magician in *Mulholland Drive*, starring alongside Rebekah Del Rio in that film's mesmerising Club Silencio scene, but his connections to Lynch and his world go much further back. Green has recently directed a beautiful and moving documentary, *I Know Catherine, The Log Lady*, which delves into the surprising life of his friend, the late Catherine E Coulson, who played arguably *Twin Peaks*' most mysterious and beloved character.

How did you come to know Catherine?

I started a theatre company with some friends, and I ended up in LA. I hung out in Beachwood Canyon in the Hollywood Hills with my friend Frankie Phipps-Wilson, her best friend Catherine E Coulson and her husband, Jack Nance, and this wonderful guy called David Lynch. So we all just started hanging out.

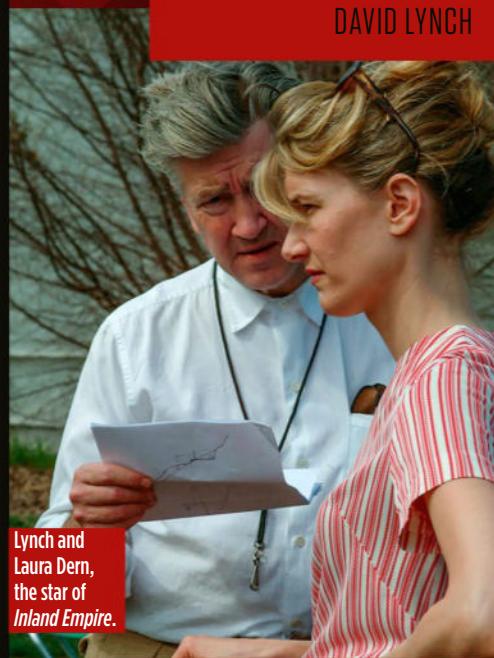
Did you learn anything new about Catherine while making the film?

She led such a rich, intersected life. I learned an incredible amount about her. This is a woman who had four really distinctive parts to her life. We all know her as the Log Lady, but we also now know that she worked on *Star Trek II: The Wrath Of Khan* [as a camera assistant] and on John Cassavetes' movies. She also had this life on stage, including 22 seasons at the biggest repertory company in the United States. And she had a fourth life, which was her spiritual and community life as a rabbi's wife.

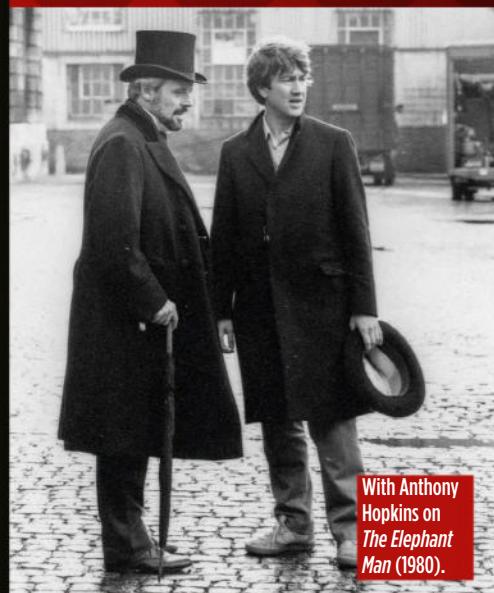
Did David see the film before he passed away?

Yes. He loved Catherine so deeply and was so connected to her. They did TM [transcendental meditation] together. I finished the movie and I sent it to David's assistant. A few weeks later I was in Frankfurt and David called. It was a 20-minute conversation and I was in tears the entire time, because he got it, y'know? He'd seen things in it that I'd forgotten that I'd done when I was building the scene. It was a wonderful feeling of somebody really knowing what you're doing and appreciating it. And then, on top of that, it's David Lynch.

Visit iknowcatherine.com to see the film for yourself!



Lynch and Laura Dern, the star of *Inland Empire*.



With Anthony Hopkins on *The Elephant Man* (1980).

things for different people. I mean [*Twin Peaks: The Return*] episode eight, the black-and-white episode? People go, "Oh, you didn't get any Emmys." And I go, "Nobody's gonna care who won the Emmys – they will study that episode in film school for eternity!"

JW: I remember James Marshall saying, "It's not always this good!" The atmosphere and the way [Lynch] treats everybody on set, it stands out. He was appreciative of everyone, no matter how small their role was, no matter what their job was on set, he treated everyone as a valuable member of the team.

SS: He was the best human being I've ever met. Just a wonderful guy. ●

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me is available on 4K now. A retrospective season, *David Lynch: The Dreamer*, is at the BFI until 1 February, bfi.org.uk.

CRAFTING THE WORLD OF WEDNESDAY

SFX DISCOVERS THE GHASTLIEST SECRETS BEHIND SEASON TWO
OF NETFLIX'S GRAVEYARD SMASH

WORDS: CLARISSE LOUGHREY

LARISSA WEEMS

The return of principal Larissa Weems (Gwendoline Christie), albeit in non-corporeal form, also heralded the return of her most glorious wardrobe staple: the Maison Schiaparelli accessory. The fashion house, founded in 1927 by Italian surrealist Elsa Schiaparelli, has maintained her flair for the unconventional in a way that feels right at home for Nevermore Academy. "The sculptural, kind of otherworldly quality of Schiaparelli is so Larissa Weems," costume designer Colleen Atwood says. "We figure she's sent every fashion magazine there is in the world. You didn't know where she'd been before, but you knew that she saw every book, every *Harper's Bazaar*, every fashion magazine, and she was up to date on what was happening."

"Gwendoline loved the bracelet that had eyes, the brooch that was like a mouth," adds fellow designer Mark Sutherland. "They all had these sensory elements about them. For her, they were moving, they were always listening or talking."



Strike a pose:
Larissa Weems's
Fashion-forward
aesthetic.



Season two gave
the creative
team fresh
challenges.



Burton with
Evie Templeton
as new student
Agnes.



THE FUNDRAISER GALA

"Wednesday's prom dress from season one was something that Colleen picked up from a vintage shop," Sutherland says. "That was the sort of vibe that we had to go from. For this season, we knew there was going to be a fundraiser gala, and from the word go we were already starting to create all these costumes. Yes, there's a lot of pressure - of 'How do we improve?', 'How do we move forward?' - but, for us, it's about elevating the costumes without losing the essence of the character."

"These are kids in another semester of school. They've come back and things have changed. Enid's changed. She's wolfed out; she's got a little bit more edgy. It's about developing the characters without feeling the pressure from everybody else that we have to create something wild and wonderful."

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS AT PILGRIM WORLD

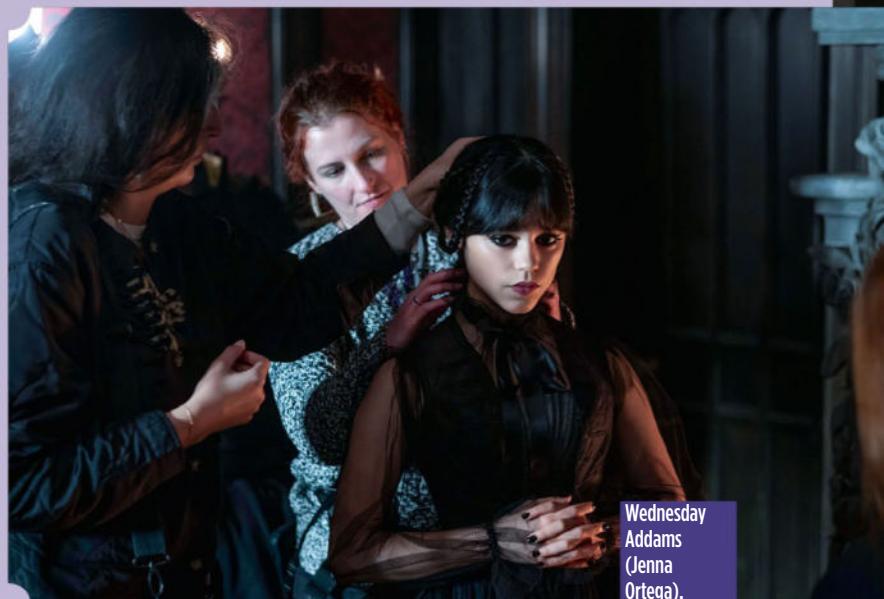
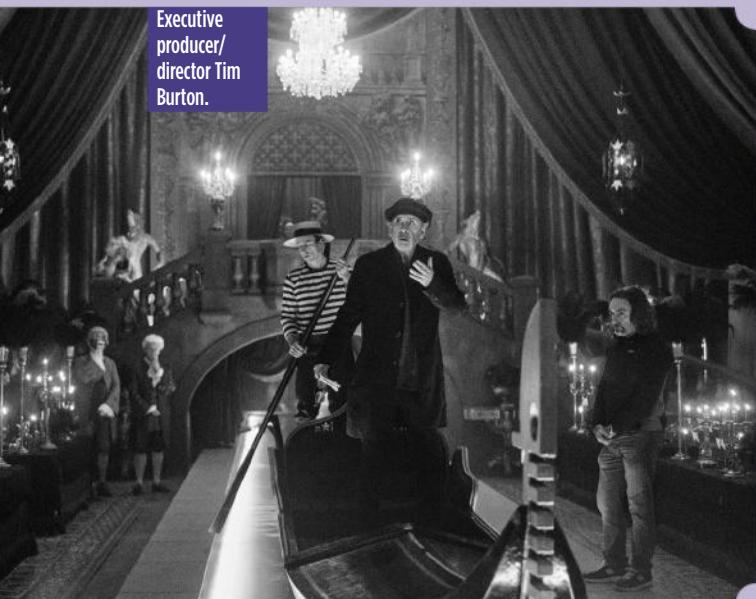
"I had a co-designer on that episode called Philip Murphy," says production designer Mark Scruton. "He did a lot of work on that. It was a tricky one: we had to address the fact that, certainly with Pilgrim World, it was a shocking hodgepodge of cultural misappropriation. We had the bare bones of a sort of 'ye olde' town that had been built for another show, that we just completely stripped back and turned into the carnage that issues forth. It became everyone's obsession. You see probably half of what we did for that set. We'd seen Pilgrim World in season one and it was a sleepy backwater, but I think we wanted to just blow it up for this season."

That includes the haunted house where a still-zombified Isaac Night (Owen Painter) claims one of his victims. "Coming from Tim [Burton's] mindset, he loves a haunted house," says Scruton. "I've had the privilege of doing a ghost train on a previous project with him [2016's *Miss Peregrine's Home For Peculiar Children*], and we got let loose in his warehouse of all his stuff. We wanted to do things that were genuinely scary. So much so that if you saw a zombie killing somebody on the floor, you would have to double take and go, 'Is that weird or is that a part of this?'"

Emma Myers (right) as Enid rehearses her dance routine.



Executive producer/director Tim Burton.



Wednesday Addams (Jenna Ortega).



Morticia (Catherine Zeta-Jones, above).



MORTICIA'S COTTAGE

"With the cottage, we knew it was specifically for Morticia, so we decided it would be an extension of her rather than the family home," Scruton says. "That gave us the opportunity to make it a much more glamorous, sumptuous environment. The implication is that some of that furniture has come from the mansion - the bear, the peacock chair, other elements."

"One of my inspirations when I read the script, where they first go in and it's this pink horror show and then it segues into her world, were the photos you see of the original *The Addams Family* sitcom. You see a colour picture of their sets, they're bright pink. But no one knew, because it was shot in black and white. It was a metaphor for what we were trying to do. The furniture was light oak, then it suddenly became black ash. The wallpaper is actually the same design, just two different colourways. So it's pinks and peach colours, and it becomes black and reds."

ISAAC NIGHT

"Miles [Millar, one of *Wednesday*'s showrunners] said to me on a call, 'We need to make an iconic zombie,'" shares prosthetics designer Tristan Versluis. "There are so many iconic zombies and there's so much history there, so it was tough! We started with 2D designs. We had some key pointers early on: big hole in the head, no brain, this distending jaw. I basically just geeked out on zombies and went back, rewatched some zombie films. Tim [Burton] – there was a little sketch done. There was an early make-up test done. It was a collaboration of lots of different people feeding in information."

"We targeted stage one first, because that was the most extreme. We knew we would be bringing a lot of bone structure out and essentially taking over Owen [Painter's] face. So once we had that design, we then did stages two and three. As he eats brains, his body is repairing itself, or it's coming back to life, so we make the skin move back into place slowly. By the time we get to stage five, it's Owen's face. We studied his bone structure and the high points in his face. We tried to not put prosthetics in the wrong place, where we don't see Owen coming through the make-up. We don't want to cover him up too much."

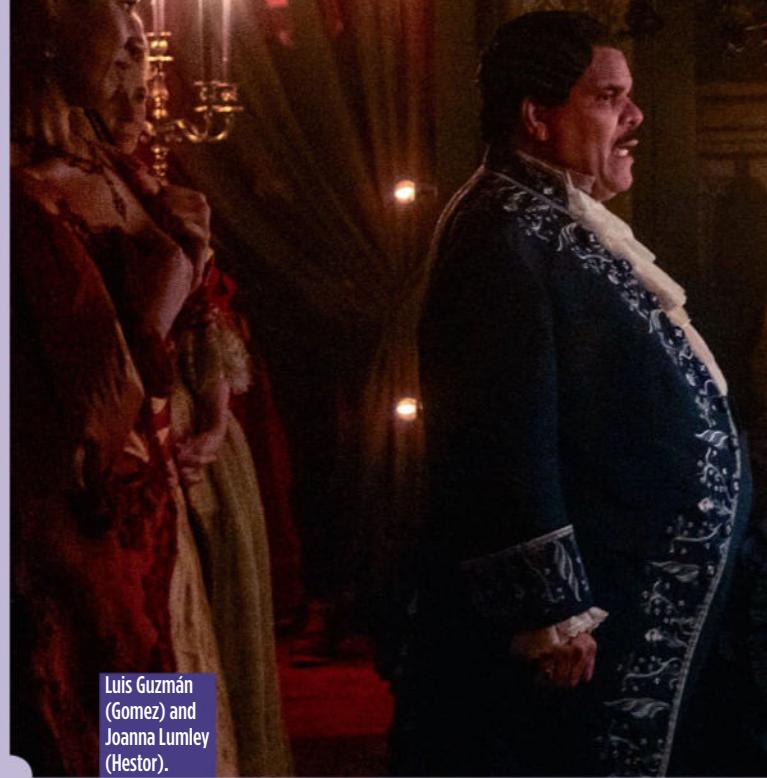


Owen Painter filming as the undead Isaac Night.



The team designed an intricate make-up for Isaac.

Burton and Lumley on set during the gala episode.



HESTER FRUMP

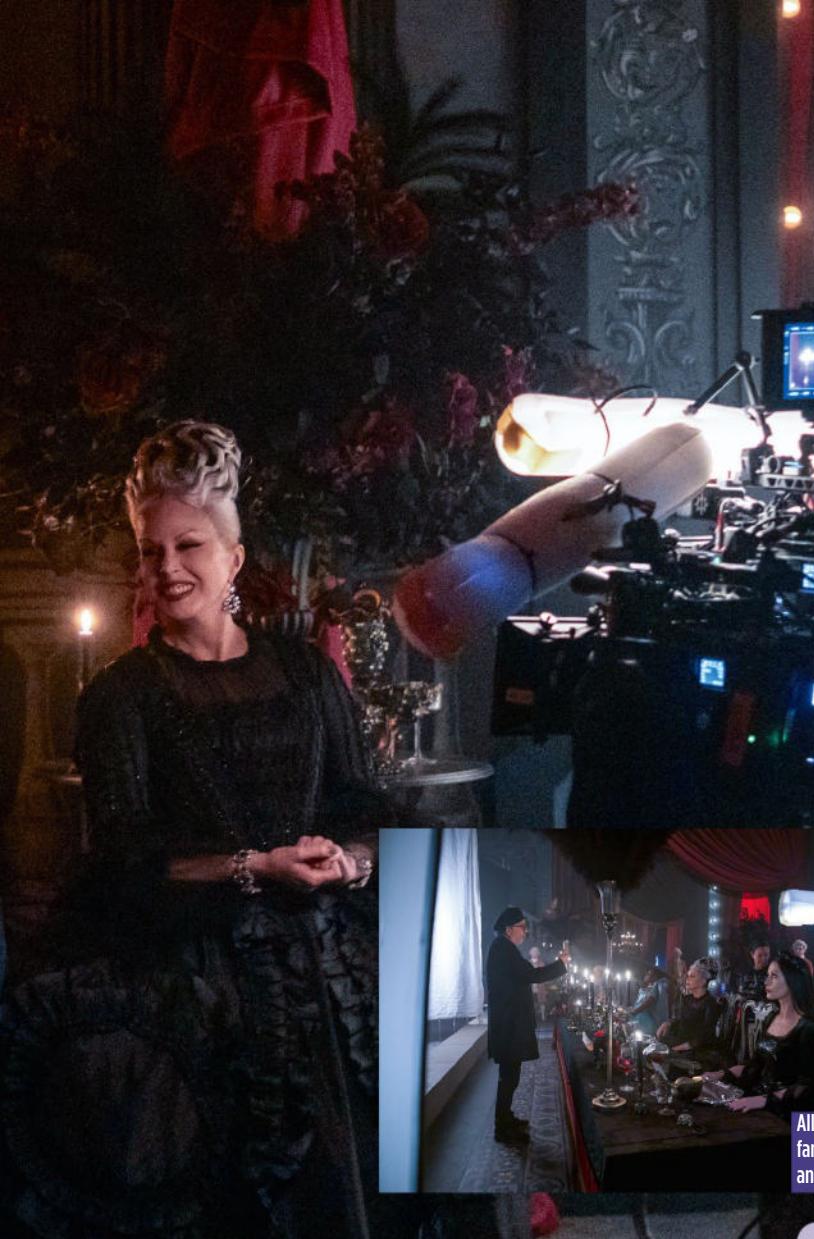
"We looked at '50s couture because that's the world she would come from, and if Hester had clothes made, she would have them all hand made," says Sutherland. "But also, we looked at Japanese designers. We really wanted to give her a bit of a rock-and-roll thing. She wears these big, chunky boots. We wanted to give her a bit of an edge. That edge is something that Wednesday can connect to – something that grandma's got, but her mother doesn't have."

It's hard, too, to look at Hester's towering, monochrome updo and not think of the English fashion icon Daphne Guinness. "Well, I met Daphne about a year and a half ago," Atwood remarks. "I did a couple of [music] videos of hers with David LaChapelle. I always thought she was such a fabulous-looking human being and otherworldly creature. So she's definitely, in the hairstyle, an influence on Hester's character – as is the Bride of Frankenstein."

ROSALINE ROTWOOD

"Lady Gaga was very into the character," says Sutherland. "She loves the show. Rosaline has a whole backstory as a character, so we looked into that and the period that she came from, and then that gave us the silhouette for the costume that we wanted to create."

Rosaline is also a "Raven" like Wednesday, a psychic capable of potent, but potentially dangerous, visions. "Because of that, we wanted a little bit of a bird effect," Sutherland continues. "We have all these tiny details, like this feather embroidery going down the sleeve. There's another layer of fabric that gives it a sort of feathery effect, and then there's the veil."



Hunter
Doohan (as
Tyler) filming
with Ortega.



THE HYDES

"We were starting from zero on that," says visual effects supervisor Tom Turnbull. "Certainly with Tyler's Hyde, Tim [Burton] recognised that. He was less concerned about some of the other creatures we were doing but, for him, the Hyde was the thing. In season one, he very much was in complete control of where that design went. He based it on, as he always does, a body of work from the '50s, '60s and '70s. I think he leaned on some of the work of [cartoonist] Ed Roth. So from our point of view, the Hyde was pretty straightforward. Tim did it all for us."

"For season two, Mama Hyde was a very different thing. Tim didn't really get that involved. Obviously he would approve the design, but he kind of let us go at it. Our brief was that it needed to be bigger than Tyler's Hyde, something that could dominate him, and it had to contain elements of Françoise [Frances O'Connor]. That's another thing that Tim does all the time; he will not really completely design a creature – or an effect, in some cases – until the actor is actually there and present."

"The actor will go through the steps of developing their character, sometimes in mechanical ways – what will their wardrobe be? What will their hair be? Only then will we finalise what the creature is. That was very much the case with Mama Hyde."



Blue man
group: Filming
an elaborate
effects shot.

ADDAMS FAMILY LORE

As Scruton points out, there are nods to the Addams Family legacy – Charles Addams's original illustrations, the '60s sitcom, and the '90s films – everywhere you look in the *Wednesday* universe. Morticia's peacock chair and the family's enormous stuffed bear, both from the old series, have clocked up appearances. "Last year, the bear was a feature of Principal Weems's office, but we actually moved it into the Addams Family house," explains the designer. "In the Tiki Tails bar, up on the wall, there's a giant marlin head with a leg sticking out with a flipper from a diver that's been eaten – again, a reference back to the sitcom."

"But I always try to bring it back to the Charles Addams drawings. That's always been our starting point, because they tell us so much. Wednesday's bedroom this season – we see more of the Addams Family mansion – I tried to make the living embodiment of the original illustration. So the bed has the same painting of an octopus at the end of it. There's a frieze going around the wall which is cavemen chasing dinosaurs. It's trying to be that world. We're not denying that's where the whole story comes from, those illustrations." ●

Wednesday is on Netflix.

TEENAGE MUTANT
NINJA TURTLES

CATCHING



Puppet master
Jim Henson
on set with his
team's creations.

THIS ISN'T OVER



THIRTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

WAS POISED TO CONQUER THE WORLD – BUT NO ONE WANTED TO FUND IT. DIRECTOR STEVE BARRON AND ACTOR ROBBIE RIST REMEMBER THE MAKING OF A POP-CULTURE JUGGERNAUT THAT NOBODY SAW COMING.

WORDS: DAVID WEST



HE ISSUE WAS TEENAGE MUTANT Ninja Turtles sounds ridiculous, who's going to go and see that?" says Steve Barron. TMNT started life as a humble black-and-white indie comic spoofing the popular trends of the '80s. A kids' cartoon debuted in 1987, before Raymond Chow's Golden Harvest, the company where Bruce Lee found kung fu stardom, bought the rights and approached Barron about directing a big-screen adaptation with a \$3 million budget. "They weren't sure whether it was going to be animation or whatever for the Turtles," says Barron, who set out to attract distributors to bump up the tight budget, but in 1988, no one was interested in comic-book movies. "The studios were running scared from *Howard The Duck*. That was a hit as a comic and had a big following yet came out and did no movie business, so that really put the fear into them. That was quoted everywhere we went. 'Turtles? That's the follow-on from *Duck*, is it?'"

CREATURE FEATURE

Barron compares pre-production to walking a tightrope, constantly scrambling for funding. "A few weeks before shooting we were out of money, it was going to be canned, and we were going to be pulled off it," he recalls. "Then New Line stepped in with just a couple of million dollars and that was enough to know that we could keep going for the seven-week shoot."

From the outset, Barron based his approach upon the style and mood of the comics. ➤

GOLDEN HARVEST/NEW LINE/CORBIS/SHUTTERSTOCK



"Looking back, if I had been sent the cartoon and offered that to make into a movie, I probably wouldn't have done it," he says. "When I went to the comic book, I just saw a great deal of earthy, grounded reality to it, where from the cartoon I got an airy-fairy, cute, quite fun but much younger vibe that would have made a film I wouldn't go and see, and I don't know how to direct a film I wouldn't go and see."

The comics offered "cinematic images that felt obvious that it could make an interesting movie and make a movie that nobody had ever seen before". That was a guiding principle for Barron when directing music videos, and he succeeded admirably, creating such cultural touchstones as Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean", A-ha's "Take On Me", and Dire Straits' "Money For Nothing". But *TMNT* presented a host of unique challenges...

To bring the Turtles to life, Barron turned to Jim Henson, with whom he had worked on TV series *The Storyteller*. Animating the Turtles' facial expressions required Henson's Creature Shop to invent six new technologies from scratch. Each individual creature required a four-man operation: one main actor in the suit, a stunt performer for the fight sequences, a puppeteer controlling facial

“When I went to the comic book, I just saw a great deal of earthy, grounded reality to it”

PICTURES: GOLDEN HARVEST/NEW LINE/KOBAL; MOVIESTORE SNAPSHUTTERSTOCK/EVERETT COLLECTION INC/ALAMY

expressions, and finally a voice actor for the ADR sessions. For Barron, this meant dealing with multiple people for each Turtle's performance while navigating the Creature Shop's groundbreaking technology.

"As a director, the job is to carry the story and constantly feed back to the story as your main thread," he says. "You get all these voices on set, you get the puppeteer's voice doing the line of dialogue in one way, then you get the person inside the suit's line of dialogue, and then you've got the puppet Splinter coming from another place with its own restrictions. It was a challenge, but by the time we got to shooting, the script was in really good shape and carried the story well from scene to scene. If you've got a good script, it's half the battle."

FIGHT CLUB

In 1999, *The Matrix* dazzled audiences with its Hong Kong-style wirework and martial arts, but a decade earlier, the connection with Golden Harvest allowed Barron to employ a squad of Hong Kong stuntmen on *TMNT*. They included Brandy Yuen, younger brother of *The Matrix*'s Yuen Woo-Ping, and Yuen Miu, who'd shared the screen with Bruce Lee in *Fist Of*



Redesigned
suits in 1993's
*Teenage Mutant
Ninja Turtles III*.

Fury. "That was really exciting," says Barron. "I think none of them had been to the States; they'd just been working in Hong Kong as stuntmen for years, they're brilliant at it. That was a lovely Golden Harvest bonus, another feather in the cap of the film. We've got the Turtles right, we've got the technology right, can we get the fighting right?"

The challenge for the Hong Kong stunt performers inside the Turtle suits was that the heads obscured much of their vision, not that this seemed to phase them in the slightest. "Their skills were so great that they could do it in the dark," says Barron. At least the stunt Turtle suits were lighter than their more animated dialogue counterparts. "You didn't have the 18 different servers in there that give you the blinks, the eye moves, the mouth moves, and the smiles, all the functions that made up the dialogue-carrying characters. They were very lightweight – in fact, it was like padding – so in some ways it made them bolder."

While the director was delighted by the stunt team, relations between Barron and Golden Harvest went south when the budget

was exhausted and Barron wanted to keep shooting. "To be fair to them, they didn't have any more money. They didn't know it was going to be a hit and they said, 'That's it, get out of there. You've got to make the film out of what you've shot already.'"

At Jim Henson's suggestion, he screened the unfinished film for Jeffrey Katzenberg at Disney, sneaking the reels out of the editing room early in the morning on three separate occasions. The Disney boss expressed enthusiasm but never stumped up any additional money, and once Golden Harvest learned about the secret screenings, "they went ballistic," says Barron. A lawsuit followed before the two parties, in Barron's words, "agreed to disagree" and the film was completed using second-unit and library footage.

VOICE OF REASON

Meanwhile, in ADR land, Robbie Rist was recording his dialogue as the voice of Michelangelo. The actor first encountered the Turtles when a friend showed him the original black-and-white comics. "I just thumbed





Mentor Splinter (voiced by Kevin Clash) returned in the second film.



Tatsu and his boss Shredder in 1991 sequel *The Secret Of The Ooze*.



Judith Hoag starred as the Turtles' ally April O'Neil.



Film two introduced villains Tokka and Rahzar.

through it," he says. "I can appreciate art but as far as reading comic books goes, it's not really my entertainment choice. That's cool, it's crazy violent, weird, here's your comic book back', then promptly forgot about it."

The years slipped by, and Rist auditioned for the movie. "Basically, they said, 'We need a surf guy.'" In 1982, Sean Penn's performance as Jeff Spicoli in *Fast Times At Ridgemont High* propelled the blond-haired surfer image into the pop-culture lexicon. "We were already making fun of that archetype. There was an awful lot of, 'Dude, that's so bitching!'" says Rist. "For people my age, *Fast Times At Ridgemont High* is

not a coming-of-age sex comedy, it's a documentary. All the people in that movie, I went to high school with. This was a snapshot of Southern California at the time."

For the actor, everything he needed to know about Michelangelo was there in the concept and script. "What else are you going to do to that?" says Rist. "Make him sound more like John Gielgud? No, it's not going to happen. When you do voiceover, some of the clues are in the description. Teenage, so you're not going to be too Sam Elliott about it."

However, not everyone was fully versed in SoCal surfer lingo. "Todd Langen, who wrote the movie, was really concerned because the guy doing the voice of Michelangelo originally was Michelan Sisti, who was the actor in the suit, and he didn't know what surfers were. The entire performance early on is him doing something which is very much not



Turtle Raphael (played and voiced by Josh Pais).

what Michelangelo turns out to be. The first thing we did was the movie trailer which had been out using the other voice. When [Langen] heard my voice he said, 'I think we're going to be okay.' Apparently, I did something right."

One very notable difference between Barron's film and the sequels of 1991 and 1993 was that Barron drew upon the aesthetic of the comics not the cartoon, resulting in a film draped in shadows and a surprising gritty portrayal of New York, which belies the fact that most of the production took place in North Carolina. Apparently, not everyone was on board with Barron's chosen aesthetic.

"I'm in a recording studio in Santa Monica, we're taking a break, and somebody from Golden Harvest shows up and takes whoever was running the session off in a corner," says Rist. "I hear them say that Golden Harvest is concerned that this movie is too dark and it's going to scare little kids and they're not going to want to go. I'm reading the paper, not listening to them of course, and I'm thinking to myself, 'What a bummer! I think what I'm seeing is a pretty fun movie.'"

On opening weekend, March 1990, Rist decided to see the film at his local multiplex. "I was going to sit in an empty theatre and bask in my incredible talent," he says, but the Saturday-morning show was sold out. So was the afternoon show and the line stretched around the building. "I'm like,

'Wow, this bodes well!'"

When he eventually got into a Sunday-evening show, "It was chaos!", in the best possible way. Rist believes it was the film's edgier, mature approach that resonated with audiences. "What brought kids to the theatre to see that movie the first time was maybe to be threatened a little bit, to maybe see your first film that had swear words in it, where you had to look up at your dad or mom to go, 'Are we supposed to be here?'"

"That's why kids went over and over again, because it was a kid movie that somehow made them feel a little grown up."

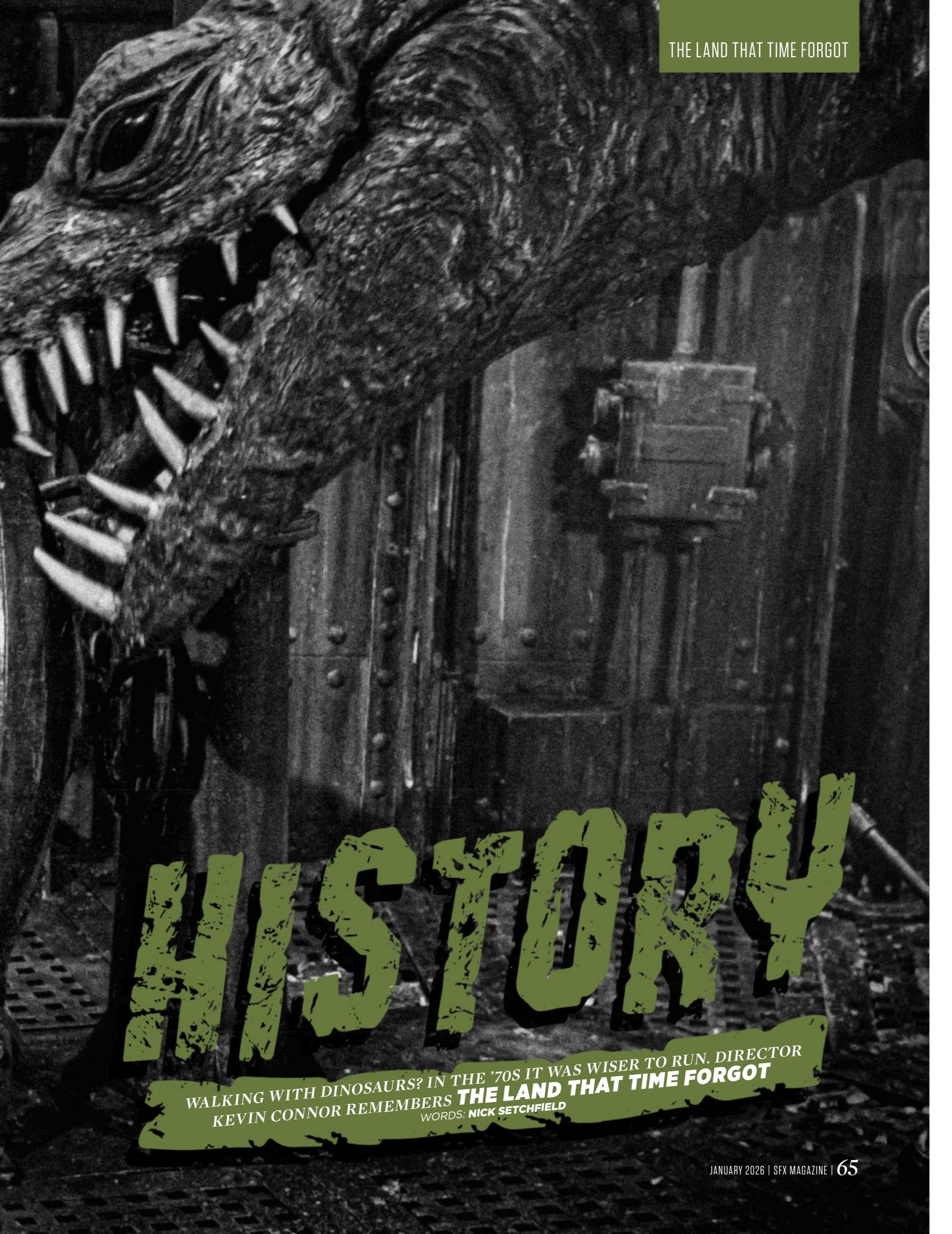
TMNT became the biggest independent release ever at the time, nice work for a movie that struggled to get over the finish line. And it still works now. "Seeing it again, it was really warming," says Steve Barron. "It did feel like it was a very adventurous project to take on. I'm proud that it is probably the bravest film of my career."

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Trilogy is on 4K UHD/Blu-ray from Arrow Video.

THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

UNNATURAL

AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURES/GETTY STOCK ART: NEUE VECTOR/GETTY



THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

ALIENSTORY

WALKING WITH DINOSAURS? IN THE '70S IT WAS WISER TO RUN. DIRECTOR KEVIN CONNOR REMEMBERS **THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT**
WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



One of the two kinds of pterodactyls used on set.

LOR KEVIN CONNOR, IT'S ALL about belief, especially when you're wrangling a plesiosaur on a Shepperton soundstage.

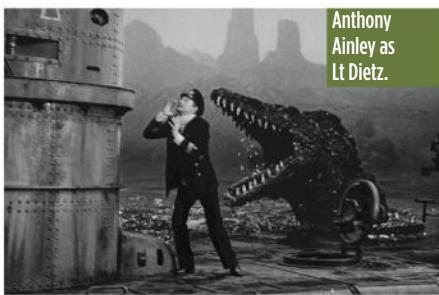
"Nobody said, 'Oh, we're making some hokey movie,'" the veteran director tells *SFX*, looking back on his Edgar Rice Burroughs adaptation, *The Land That Time Forgot*. "When you do this kind of movie, you've got to play it absolutely straight. You can't laugh at the genre. You can't take the piss out of the genre. You've got to get the audience to believe that you're on that submarine, and there's some dinosaur snapping at the conning tower!"

As a marauding mass of rubber, this particular prehistoric predator might have confounded paleontologists, but it thrilled a generation hungry for big-screen dino action in the decades before the *Jurassic* franchise.

"You don't set out to make a classic," says Connor, before catching himself, modestly. "Well, not a classic, but a movie that's had a life of 50 years. Everybody enjoyed working on the picture because it was fun and different. Everybody got into the spirit of it."



A Plesiosaur attacks the U-boat.



Anthony Ainley as Lt Dietz.

CREATING THE WORLD

The Land That Time Forgot marked a sidestep into high adventure for Britain's Amicus Productions, the plucky Hammer rival best known for its portmanteau horrors. Connor had impressed the producers with 1974's *From Beyond The Grave*, his first credit as a director after working in the industry as a sound editor and then a film editor.

"They seemed to like it," he recalls of the darkly whimsical Peter Cushing chiller. "It came in on budget and schedule and it was well received. When we'd finished it I was twiddling my thumbs, not knowing whether I should go back to editing or develop my own stuff. And then up comes this. Obviously, I'd heard of Edgar Rice Burroughs, but only *Tarzan*, because that's what we saw at the Saturday morning pictures when I was a kid, for a shilling or whatever it cost."

"I wasn't particularly interested in science fiction adventure-type things. That wasn't my bag. But I'd got the break and it seemed a bit silly not to carry on. And it wasn't one of their £200,000 projects! It was a much bigger epic."



“When you do this kind of movie, you’ve got to play it absolutely straight”

Part of a multi-picture deal with the Burroughs estate, the movie adapts the first part of the Caspax saga, originally serialised across three issues of *Blue Book Magazine* in 1918. A quintessential Burroughs blend of gung-ho escapades and fantastical world-building, it takes us to an uncharted subcontinent, concealed behind Antarctic ice, where dinosaurs have survived pesky asteroid strikes to co-exist with primitive man. Naturally, there’s also quicksand and a temperamental volcano, just to keep things interesting.

The screenplay was by celebrated SF novelist Michael Moorcock and his longtime friend James Cawthorn. The pair had bonded over a shared love of all things Burroughs, with Cawthorn contributing to *Burroughsania*, the dedicated fanzine that Moorcock had edited in the 1950s.

“I do know Moorcock wasn’t happy with the final version of the movie,” Connor confesses. “But I never got introduced to him and he never came to the set. I think somebody may have had a hand in the script between the one he wrote and the one that I ended up with.”

It’s a story that promises not just pulp thrills, but genuine cinematic spectacle. Just look at the poster that accompanied the film’s release: an explosive collage of sinister U-boat, apocalyptic lava and rampaging prehistoric beasts – including, gloriously, what appears to be an amphibious T rex, sadly absent from the movie itself. Did Connor ever baulk at the sheer ambition of this production? It was only his second time out as director, after all, and he was essentially being asked to deliver *Jurassic Park* some 20 years ahead of schedule.

“I wasn’t really daunted. I looked at it as a challenge. How do we solve the problems of everything? I had a first-class production

PEOPLE POWER

Beyond Land's end

Kevin Connor returned to the worlds of Edgar Rice Burroughs for 1976's *At The Earth's Core*, adapting the first book in the Pellucidar series.

“Maurice Carter came up with the idea that instead of having so many puppet-type dinosaurs, we could design some of the creatures so that we could get very small stunt guys inside them. So there are several scenes where you’ve actually got human beings inside full-sized costumes. Some bits worked, some bits didn’t. Maurice was trying to experiment and get better movement in the beasts.”

1977 brought *The People That Time Forgot*, a direct sequel to *Land* that followed the search for Bowen Tyler. “Patrick Wayne was our lead, and lovely Sarah Douglas, and we went off to one of the Canary islands to shoot. We were out there for a good couple of weeks on a proper location, because the black volcanic rock had a different look to it. The final screenplay was a lot different from the book, much more simplified and adjusted to follow on from *The Land That Time Forgot*.“

Another Burroughs adaptation never made it to the screen. “We wanted to do *John Carter Of Mars*,“ Connor reveals. “It had some elements that would have been really expensive, so we wondered how we were going to do it, but at the end of the day, they wanted so much money for the rights that it was out of our budget range. So we abandoned it and went another course.

“There’s a lot of stories. Edgar Rice Burroughs turned out a lot of material...“

PICTURES: AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PICTURES/GETTY, STUDIOCANAL FILMS LTD/ALAMY, AMICUS/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK, LMPC VIA GETTY.



Roger Dicken contributed the dinosaur puppets.



designer, Maurice Carter, a brilliant mind who knew how to do things. I had Derek Meddings, the special effects guy and his team. They had been working with Gerry Anderson and were up-and-coming, brilliant guys. Yes, you always get a tummy turnover on the first day, but the people I had around me were first class.”

LAND OF THE DINOSAURS

Crucial to the film’s success was how it realised the extinction-defying creatures that stalk the lost realm of Caprona. Here, Connor tapped the talent of special effects artist Roger Dicken, Oscar-nominated with Jim Danforth for their work on 1970’s *When Dinosaurs Ruled The Earth*. While that Hammer extravaganza used Harryhausen-style stop motion animation, for *Land*, Dicken favoured what were essentially sophisticated hand puppets.

“He came along with them in boxes, already done,” Connor recalls of his first encounter with Dicken’s primeval menagerie. “I’m not sure whether he had been commissioned to create them, or maybe Maurice Carter knew about his work and said, ‘Look, this is possibly a way to go...’ I remember going to have a meeting with him, and he opened these boxes. They were quite big things.”

While these hand-operated creations now have a distinct retro charm, there’s also a tangible sense of life to them. “We were trying to get that fluidity and credibility. It was all very intricate. I think three or four people had to operate them, a bit like the Muppets, without seeing the poles and stuff. We had a good couple of weeks working with the models. Roger’s contribution was enormous, especially in the detail of those dinosaurs, because I could get really close on some of their faces.”

But for all the texture and flexibility on display, there were drawbacks to this technique, as Connor shares. “You could move them a little bit, the jaws were great, the hands were great, but you couldn’t actually make them move. I think there are two or three shots in the movie that we handed over to Cliff Culley, who was at Pinewood Studios, and he created a fixed frame element, where you had a →



dinosaur in the distance, moving, and birds flying and stuff like that. But for us, we couldn't get the dinosaurs to move. They were pretty stationary.

"You could make bits of the thing come to life with the rods and the hands up the insides and so on, but we couldn't actually get a charge of dinosaurs, like we saw in *Jurassic Park* later on."

The creatures were blended into the action using front projection, creating an immersive experience for the cast. Background plates were shot on large-format VistaVision for optimal quality.

"All the plates were shot before we did the main shooting," Connor tells SFX. "I went along with the advice of the experts that front projection was the way to go, because you could see it through the camera – with back

“There were two sizes of pterodactyl so you could make it look further away”

projection the plates are put on later. The actors had the advantage of seeing what they were looking at, so they could get their eyelines right. It was a much easier process to work with. The next day, you saw the result of your work."

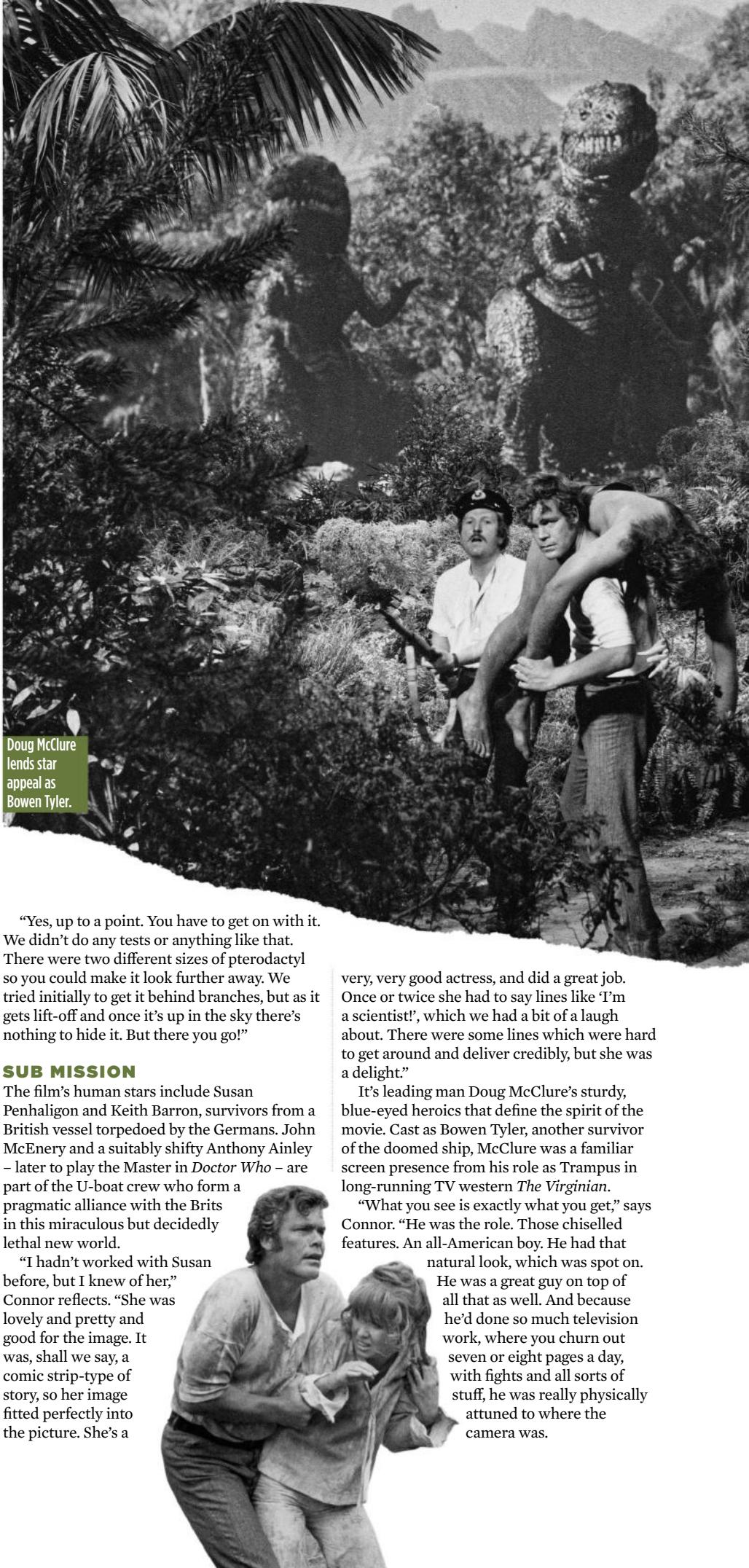
Along with the puppets, the production employed prop dinosaur parts, including the head and neck of the plesiosaur that gives the sub such an unfriendly welcome to Caprona.

"We did build some full-size limbs and things. They did look a bit rubbery at times! But that was the way you could make them in those days. It was not easy. And then along comes *Jurassic Park* and knocks the wind out of us!"

Undoubtedly the least successful of the film's effects is a fibreglass pterodactyl, a rather rigid full-size model swooping on visible wires.

"Yes, that was a bit tricky," admits Connor. "The pterodactyl was on the end of a huge crane. We painted the cables, sprayed them down to get rid of the glistening, but you can see them. Today, it would be easy to take that stuff out [digitally]."

So do you just grit your teeth at that point and think, "I've got to get through this – I've got to get this shot"?



"Yes, up to a point. You have to get on with it. We didn't do any tests or anything like that. There were two different sizes of pterodactyl so you could make it look further away. We tried initially to get it behind branches, but as it gets lift-off and once it's up in the sky there's nothing to hide it. But there you go!"

SUB MISSION

The film's human stars include Susan Penhaligon and Keith Barron, survivors from a British vessel torpedoed by the Germans. John McEnery and a suitably shifty Anthony Ainley – later to play the Master in *Doctor Who* – are part of the U-boat crew who form a pragmatic alliance with the Brits in this miraculous but decidedly lethal new world.

"I hadn't worked with Susan before, but I knew of her," Connor reflects. "She was lovely and pretty and good for the image. It was, shall we say, a comic strip-type of story, so her image fitted perfectly into the picture. She's a

very, very good actress, and did a great job. Once or twice she had to say lines like 'I'm a scientist!', which we had a bit of a laugh about. There were some lines which were hard to get around and deliver credibly, but she was a delight."

It's leading man Doug McClure's sturdy, blue-eyed heroics that define the spirit of the movie. Cast as Bowen Tyler, another survivor of the doomed ship, McClure was a familiar screen presence from his role as Trampus in long-running TV western *The Virginian*.

"What you see is exactly what you get," says Connor. "He was the role. Those chiselled features. An all-American boy. He had that natural look, which was spot on. He was a great guy on top of all that as well. And because he'd done so much television work, where you churn out seven or eight pages a day, with fights and all sorts of stuff, he was really physically attuned to where the camera was."



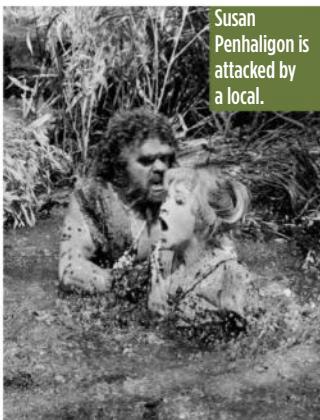
"He knew how to throw a punch and do all those kind of things, because that was what he was brought up to do. And he was really good at it. The stunt guys loved him because you didn't have to do take after take – no one said 'It didn't look real, Doug!' He just knew how to get the swing of the punch an eighth of an inch off someone's chin.

"Doug was one of those guys who just went along with whatever life gave you. I think if he had been plotting his career seriously he wouldn't have done this movie, because it's a European picture and there's no budget."

For all the firm-jawed derring-do on display, there's also a surprising streak of melancholy. One memorable shot lingers on a tear running from the eye of a dying styracosaur, mercilessly shelled by the U-boat crew. As Connor reveals, this was a statement, not just a visual flourish.

"They're always shooting these dinosaurs [in movies]! They're always killing things! I'm anti-gun and all the rest of it. There was a full-size head that was on the set and I said to the DP and the camera operator, 'While the set's being lit for something else, I want to do a

Despite its age, *Land* remains much loved.



Susan Penhaligon is attacked by a local.



The caveman is played by Bobby Parr.



Bowen Tyler takes on a caveman.

shot of this eye – the eye of the dinosaur.' I got one of the special effects guys to add the tear. It's a bit of sympathy for the poor old dinosaur. He's just minding his own business! It wasn't in the script; just something done on the spur of the moment."

The film may have been the most ambitious Amicus project to date, but its premiere was distinctly low-key, as Connor recalls.

"They decided to have it up in Leicester Square and only invite children, on a Saturday morning. No press, no nothing. But the reception was phenomenal, the cheering. The critics didn't like it, but as John Dark, the producer said, 'It just goes to show, there's a massive audience out there of kids enjoying these kind of high adventure stories."

Released a handful of years before *Star Wars* redefined the blockbuster, *The Land That Time Forgot* remains a cherished piece of fantasy cinema, even if it's one that now feels as much a part of a lost world as the beasts of Caprona.

"It was a low-budget movie, it wasn't *Jurassic Park*," says Connor, struggling to explain such enduring appeal after half a century. "I'm so surprised. Maybe it's the innocence. I can't put my finger on it, to be honest. It's light-hearted and fresh and I guess there's an element to it that captures the imagination. Some of the effects are a bit creaky, but you forgive the film for that."

"I just got lucky. It's one of those moments."

The man who brought this impossible kingdom to the screen has one more thing to say to *SFX*. "Keep it all alive!"

Frankly, extinction doesn't look likely. Time didn't forget. ●

The Land That Time Forgot is available on Blu-ray.



AM SHINE

Scary guy: the Irish writer tells us about his lifelong love of horror

Words by Jonathan Wright // Portrait by Isabella Krasa

GROWING UP ON THE RAINSWEPT ATLANTIC coast of Ireland, AM Shine was always conscious of the islands that lie off the mainland. “The elements, the weather, the fog, the cold, the wind, everything makes them so cruel and inhospitable,” he tells *SFX*. “It’s just the perfect setting for a horror story.”

Accordingly, Shine’s chilling fourth novel, *Grace*, is set on a fictionalised version of the real-world isle of Croaghnaeela. It’s a place described in the novel as “like a mound of dead leaves afloat on the ocean”. Clearly, no sensible person would venture here – even the fare-gouger ferryman, Maloney, never sets foot on the island. But that doesn’t stop book dealer Grace, drawn by the promise of revelations about her family history, making the journey.

Horror novels, says Shine, derive their power from a sense of mystery leading to suspense, something he “leaned into” with *Grace*. “Even the islanders themselves have secrets,” he says. “I wanted this idea that no one really knows what’s happening on this island, there are only whispers and rumours. They say there hasn’t been a child born there for 30 years. It’s an ageing population and nobody knows what happened that’s made them so weird.”

In Shine’s own estimation, *Grace* deals with the “residual trauma” of an “awful thing that everyone’s trying to forget”. It’s also a book that draws in elements of folk horror. Here, says Shine, the novel’s setting helps because “by going to an island, we’re really stripping away a lot of the comforts that are part of our lives”. Amplifying this idea, Croaghnaeela’s residents are “a bit bygone” in their attitudes.

But this isn’t generic folk horror. Shine’s fiction draws extensively on Irish folklore. In the case of *Grace*, this means the anti-Santa figure of The Bodach. “He’s the bad king in Irish folklore,” says Shine. “He’s known for coming down chimneys and stealing away children.” This makes Croaghnaeela a bad place for the construction of an orphanage, a notion that animates the book’s backstory.

THE NIGHT CALLER

The specificity of his novels, says Shine, seems to have gone over especially well in the USA. So well indeed that M Night Shyamalan optioned Shine’s eerie debut novel, *The Watchers*, published in 2021. This led to a video meeting between novelist and filmmaker. “I was smoking cigarettes on the back patio,” he remembers. “But he was nice. He gave me a good solid hour of his time. He knew the book really well and he was really charismatic, a really charming guy. We were just discussing the different ideas he had for the book.” In the summer of 2024, the movie



BIODATA

From Galway, Ireland

Greatest Hits
The Watchers was followed by a sequel, *Stay In The Light* (2024), which continues the story of Mina. He is also the author of *The Creeper* (2022).

Random Fact
Shine thinks Irish mythology is designed to terrify children: “There isn’t a single folk story that’s endearing or inspiring – they’re all spooky as hell.”

version was released, the directorial debut of M Night Shyamalan’s daughter, Ishana.

Such was Shine’s worry over ensuring he had bandwidth for his call with Shyamalan Sr, a nervousness born of the lousy Wi-Fi in his apartment, that he conducted the call from his parents’ home in the village of Menlo, County Galway. Turns out it’s an almost comically appropriate place for a horror writer to have grown up.

“It used to be quite a thriving little village back in the 19th century,” he explains of a settlement that was dominated by its castle, which burnt down in 1910. “Now it’s just full of ruined cottages with patches of ivy all over them. There’s a cemetery on the hill that used to be a children’s burial ground. Everything about this village is creepy as hell.”

HP SOURCE

Despite the spookiness of his surroundings, Shine, the youngest of four brothers, couldn’t get enough of horror. “I remember just loving horror movies,” he says. “It’s a weird, inexplicable thing. My mum was great; she used to watch horror movies with me when nobody else did – *Candyman*, *Jaws* and *Halloween*.” Shine was also an avid reader, devouring his father’s “paperback thrillers”. And then, aged 13 or 14, came a fateful encounter with an HP Lovecraft omnibus complete with a cover showing “this big, weird, bloated creature who was eating naked women”.

So began Shine’s fascination with classic literary horror. “That was it done for me,” he says. “I’d never read anything like this before.” For the next 15 years, he “didn’t read a book by a living author”. In great part, this was because he valued the eeriness of these stories, in contrast to modern horror novels that so often turned out to be about “the politics in a certain little town or family dynamics”.

Shine studied for an MA in history, but on finishing his degree, he spent time in Trieste, Italy, and wrote a “terrible” novella. Subsequently, he learnt his craft by writing short stories while keeping body and soul together by working in retail. These tales were “too dense and gothic”, but he persevered. “The stories were good, but the writing was too heavy,” Shine says. Nevertheless, he won awards. A small press published a collection of his stories.

This brings us back to *The Watchers*, which grew from his short fiction. Having resided for so long in the literary past, Shine consciously embraced contemporary horror. It worked. “Thankfully, that was the book that got me into the business,” he says. For all that he knows the terrain of horror’s past, he hasn’t looked back since. ●

Grace is published by Head Of Zeus on 12 February.



“I wanted this idea that no one really knows what's happening on this island”

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2026

edited by Ian Berriman

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AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH

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★★★★★ SUPERB

★★★★★ GOOD

★★★★★ AVERAGE

★★★★★ POOR

★★★★★ TERRIBLE



Laugh now,
but you'll all
be wearing it
next season.

AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH

Burn, baby, burn



RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 195 minutes

► Director James Cameron

► Cast Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldaña, Sigourney Weaver, Stephen Lang

• If *Avatar: The Way Of Water*'s Cameronic reference point was *Titanic* (see Kate Winslet as Metkayinan matriarch Ronal and its sinking boat finale), then *Avatar: Fire And Ash*'s must surely be *Aliens*. At numerous points in James Cameron's third visit to the distant moon of Pandora, various characters are given tutorials in firearm usage that inevitably recall the one Michael Biehn's Hicks gave Sigourney Weaver's Ripley in his earlier foray into epic space action. In her rather peculiar mo-cap role as 14-year-old Na'vi Kiri, meanwhile, 76-year-old

Weaver gets a callback of her own with a line that self-consciously apes the famous one she delivered to *Aliens*' Alien Queen.

Sixteen years on from the original *Avatar* and three years after the second, *Fire And Ash* is technically Cameron's first threequel. From a narrative standpoint, though, it's very much *The Way Of Water* 2, with most of that film's conflicts and story beats replayed anew on a more grandiose scale. This inevitably means a degree of repetitiveness in a film whose plot largely sees its protagonists and their children being caught, freed, then captured again. There is also the ongoing

“Cameron has truly pulled out all the stops”

hostility that Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang) feels towards his erstwhile subordinate Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a beef that has survived them both being transplanted into blue-skinned humanoid anatomies.

Thank goodness, then, for Oona Chaplin's Varang, the fiery sovereign of an ash-daubed Na'vi clan whose imperious stride into the *Avatar* universe finally gifts it a worthy villain. Nursing a grievance against Pandora's mother goddess Eywa for decimating her tribe with a devastating volcano, this majestically unhinged force of nature seizes Cameron's saga by the scruff of its kuru and gives it a much-needed shake. Her (too few) scenes opposite Saldaña's grief-stricken Neytiri hiss and sizzle, as do the seductive interludes her character shares with Quaritch. Only a drab departure disappoints, her snarling firecracker fizzling

out amidst a climactic deluge of computer-generated bombast.

To say *Fire And Ash* looks incredible feels like stating the blindingly obvious. This time around, though, Cameron has truly pulled out all the stops with a series of aerial, forest-based and watery set-pieces that continually boggle the senses. A whirling dogfight between Varang's forces and the billowing jellyfish Zeppelins of nomadic "wind trader" Peylak (David Thewlis) is an early highlight that the director tops later on with an oceanic confrontation between Pandora's human interlopers and whale-like behemoths the Tulkun.

It's almost enough to make us overlook the dreadful dialogue, a clunky combo of pompous proclamation ("We do not suck on the breast of weakness!") and West Coast valley speak ("That was insane, cuz!") that makes ChatGPT sound like Shakespeare.

Neil Smith

i Out now from DK: *The Making Of Avatar* (which covers all three films) and *Avatar: Fire And Ash - The Visual Dictionary*.



SILENT NIGHT, DEADLY NIGHT



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 96 minutes

► Director Mike P Nelson

► Cast Rohan Campbell,

Ruby Modine, Mark Acheson,

David Lawrence Brown

➲ What do Malcolm

McDowell, Mickey Rooney and two-time Bond girl Maud Adams have in common? The answer is they have all featured in instalments of the *Silent Night, Deadly Night* franchise, the latest of which now appears some 41 years on from the 1984 original. That film, about a toy-store Santa who goes on a killing spree, was controversial enough to have protesters picketing movie theatres.

Mike P Nelson's reboot might be no less bloody, but it's an altogether cannier animal that tempers its excesses with humour and a surprising amount of sweetness.

The basic set-up remains the same, with drifter Billy (Rohan Campbell) arriving in a small town in the run-up to Christmas intent on reducing its population by at least 12 souls. Here, though, he is on a crusade, being blessed/cursed with a preternatural intuition his victims have been sufficiently naughty to merit an appointment with his axe.

Knowing an innocent will die for every miscreant he spares adds further zing to his swing in a film that, when not requiring Billy to decimate a room of neo-Nazis, finds time to gift him a feisty love interest (Ruby Modine). There may not be just Claus here for another slew of sequels, but this revamp is no lump of coal. **Neil Smith**



"Pineapple?
On pizza? Do
you care to
rethink that?"

FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S 2

Mean machines



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 104 minutes

► Director Emma Tammi

► Cast Josh Hutcherson, Elizabeth Lail,

Piper Rubio, Matthew Lillard

➲ *Five Nights At Freddy's 2* (er, shouldn't that be *Ten Nights At Freddy's*?) strives to up the ante on its 2023 predecessor, and largely succeeds. There are three sets of rogue animatronic creatures this time, with a new antagonist in the form of an evil marionette that turns its human hosts into grinning simulacra of *Saw's* Billy the Puppet. There are knowing nods to *Alien*, *Predator* and *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, plus new cast additions in *Ghostbuster* McKenna Grace, Wayne Knight and a cameoing Skeet Ulrich.

For all that, *FNAF2* ranks as only a marginal improvement on its tame and torpid predecessor, with too many storylines jostling for attention, a disappointing dearth of actual bloodshed, and a bland endgame only interested

in laying the groundwork for the inevitable *Freddy's 3*.

Having saved his little sis (Piper Rubio) from the bunny suit-wearing psychopath (Matthew Lillard) who kidnapped their brother, former security guard Mike (Josh Hutcherson) is in the mood for love with Lillard's cop daughter Vanessa (Elizabeth Lail). But she is beset by some understandable PTSD, not to mention lingering guilt over a classmate who perished at the flagship Freddy Fazbear's 20 years earlier.

The dead girl in question isn't likely to rest in peace in a sequel that commendably preserves the original's clunky 8-bit aesthetic. Even if you do go home humming the Newton Brothers' terrific synth-led score, though, you can't help wondering if we really needed another movie about lumbering mechanical pizzeria mascots who are far too slow to be scary. **Neil Smith**

i Ulrich and Lillard previously starred as killer Billy Loomis and his apprentice Stu Macher in Wes Craven's *Scream*.



ZOOTROPOLIS 2



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 108 minutes

► Directors Byron Howard,

Jared Bush

► Cast Ginnifer Goodwin, Jason

Bateman, Ke Huy Quan, Idris Elba

➲ Snakes have always proved notoriously difficult to animate, which might explain why there have only been two notable examples – *The Jungle Book's* Kaa and *Robin Hood's* Sir Hiss – in Disney's critter-crammed back catalogue. To their slitherhood we can now add Gary, a venomous pit viper whose sudden appearance in *Zootropolis*'s all-animal alt-world sets the cat among the pigeons in Byron Howard and Jared Bush's follow-up to the former's 2016 original.

The nine years it's taken *Zootropolis* to hatch a sequel have enabled DreamWorks' *The Bad Guys* to steal its thunder, not least by having its own ophidian protagonist in Marc Maron's Mr Snake. It's unfortunate, then, that Howard and Bush should choose to start *Zootropolis 2* with the kind of chaotic car chase and elaborate heist that its franchise rival has now had two films to finesse.

Things get more recognisably Zootopian once bunny cop Judy (Ginnifer Goodwin) and her vulpine partner Nick (Jason Bateman) get out of the city and begin exploring new environs, like the pinniped-friendly Marsh Market, in their quest to uncover why Gary (Ke Huy Quan) has slunk away with a wealthy lynx's family heirloom. But no amount of haring about, alas, can mask the fact that the wit and charm which made the first film so rewatchable have gone similarly AWOL. **Neil Smith**

THE WAR BETWEEN THE LAND AND THE SEA

Horny Grandchildren Of Earth



► UK Streaming now, BBC iPlayer
 ► Creator Russell T Davies
 ► Cast Russell Tovey, Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Jemma Redgrave, Ruth Madeley

EPISODES 1.01-1.05 **If, last year, you'd** asked fans to name the best *Doctor Who* spinoff, you wouldn't have got many hands raised for *K-9 And Company*. *The Sarah Jane Adventures* would have had its supporters. But most would have plumped for *Torchwood: Children Of Earth*. So it should be no great surprise that this five-parter sees Russell T Davies returning to the scene of a former triumph.

Like that event series, it features diplomatic meetings (facilitated by a specially built tank) between humanity and another species – in this case the Sea Devils, now rebranded “Aquakind”. There are ruthless discussions in the halls of power, assassination attempts, and a deadly virus. They even kill off a hero's lover in episode four (will we get a new shrine down Cardiff Bay?). In large part, it's the sort of hardware-heavy, “grown-up” thriller that can placate male viewers who curled their lips, arms crossed, at “Space Babies”.

At the same time, thanks to an increasingly foregrounded

relationship between Barclay (Russell Tovey), the lowly clerk thrust into the position of speaking for humanity, and lead Homo Aqua Salt (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), it's also a show with appeal for viewers whose shelves are crammed with “Tik-Tok sensation” romantasy. While blending clashing flavours is characteristic of Russell T Davies's work, this does threaten to make the show feel like a bit of a cut-and-shut, one where the joins creak under pressure. But Davies and co-writer Pete McTighe's welding somehow holds.

The interest graph has a few peaks and troughs. Part two, for example, risks becoming overly talky (if not downright preachy), as Barclay denounces the likes of Thames Water from his rostrum. Whereas episode three is outstanding, delivering a double sucker-punch cliffhanger and a beautifully written, claustrophobic diving-bell-descent sequence that boils down to simply five people sharing their anxieties.

Every slightly bewildering plot turn or daffy moment is overbalanced on the dramatic scales by something grippingly tense (a terribly butch stand-off between UNIT and regular army), creepy (Homo Aqua warriors standing amidst the Mediterranean waves at night), or emotionally affecting (Kate Lethbridge-Stewart's haunted response to bereavement, clearly written from bitter experience). *Torchwood*'s time has undoubtedly passed, but once the BBC does get its Whoniverse ducks in a row, we hope a recurring UNIT series is part of the masterplan. **Ian Berriman**

Russell Tovey wouldn't snog a '70s-style Sea Devil.



i The scenes where Barclay releases Salt from a UNIT lorry were shot at Bristol Harbourside's Amphitheatre.



A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS: THE ROOM IN THE TOWER



► UK Streaming now, BBC iPlayer
 ► Director Mark Gatiss
 ► Cast Tobias Menzies, Joanna Lumley, Ben Mansfield

• Mark Gatiss's latest

televisual mince pie tackles EF Benson's 1912 story “The Room In The Tower”, which sees a man plagued by a recurring dream – an appointment with a space holding “something awful” arriving with grim inevitability.

The fundamentals are all present and correct: a gathering of an upper-class clan; a card game with ominous all-black deck; the titular room and its sinister painting of the family matriarch. But as usual, Gatiss makes some wise amendments: a cornily sinister gravestone is snipped from the dreamscape.

Not for the first time, he also supplies a tale which peters out on the page with a more satisfying sense of completion, pushing the time frame forward three decades and adding a framing story set during the Blitz, as the haunted Roger Winstanley (Tobias Menzies) shelters from doodlebugs in the Underground – a setting which plays to the writer's strengths.

The nature of the tale means that telefantasy legend Joanna Lumley is essentially tasked with simply repeating one sinister invitation. But that's the way it has to be – and we do get the compensatory treat of seeing the former Sapphire plastered in ghastly prosthetics.

Ian Berriman

TALAMASCA: THE SECRET ORDER Season One

Who witches the watchmen?



UK Streaming now, Netflix

US Streaming now, AMC

► Showrunners John Lee Hancock, Mark Lafferty
► Cast Nicholas Denton, Elizabeth McGovern, William Fichtner, Celine Buckens

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **There's an X-Files**

Easter egg in *Talamasca*: a sticker on a phone box saying, "Trust no one". As this six-part series progresses, you start to think that's a colossal understatement.

The latest entry into the small screen's Anne Rice Immortal Universe, after *Interview With The Vampire* and *Mayfair Witches*, *Talamasca* centres on an ancient, secret organisation that polices the

supernatural, one which appeared in a number of her novels.

The show opens with the US-based *Talamasca* recruiting a reluctant young mind reader, Guy, and sending him on a mission to London, where the UK branch is going off-piste. In London, Guy weaves his way between vampire plots, witches' covens and the Metropolitan Police in a search for an ancient tome that may as well be called *The McGuffin*. All the while the woman who recruited him has her own secret mission.

So here's the crucial thing: *Talamasca* isn't a patch on *Interview With The Vampire*, but it's way more watchable than *Mayfair Witches*. While *Interview* is a full-on prestige drama,



Kids, eh? Gets a torch out, but leaves the curtains closed.

Talamasca is more like one of those plot-driven Syfy supernatural series of the early 2010s, but with moments of Grand Guignol horror, black humour and quirky character interactions to lift it above average. Some impressive production design and moody cinematography of nocturnal London also gloss over the cracks.

The main crack being a convoluted plot that lurches about

like a coked-up, three-legged badger, in which everyone has so many secrets and undisclosed allegiances that you end up with revelation fatigue. It's not that the storyline's difficult to follow – more that after a while you start wondering if you can be arsed to follow it. **Dave Golder**

i William Fichtner enjoyed playing with the big lever that released the revenants so much, he asked for it as a series wrap gift.

PLURIBUS Season One

Living In Harmony



UK/US Streaming now, Apple TV

► Creator Vince Gilligan

► Cast Rhea Seehorn, Karolina Wydra, Carlos-Manuel Vesga

EPISODES 1.01-1.09 **It's been 18 years** since the last remake of *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* came along (and 47 since a *really good* one), so Vince Gilligan's new series is well overdue. The *Breaking Bad* creator's return to Albuquerque reminds us that while now famous for narco drama he was also, back in the day, responsible for many top-tier episodes of *The X-Files*.

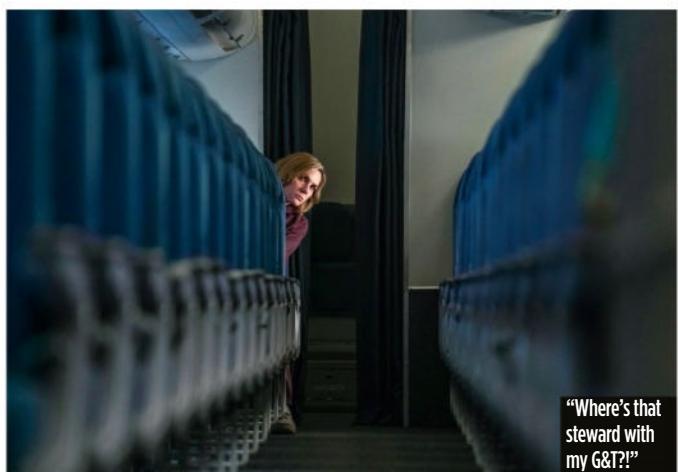
This opaquely-titled series (a nod to US motto "E pluribus unum" – "Out of many, one") is essentially *Body Snatchers* with a different delivery system. This time, it's not drifting seeds but a signal from space which kick-starts the conversion of all of

humanity (barring 13 people) into one interconnected whole, with shared memories and knowledge. World peace in an instant – but also the death of individuality.

Millions die in "the Joining", one the partner of fantasy novelist Carol Sturka (Rhea Seehorn). She's implacably resolved on a reset. But the other 12 "survivors" are content with life in what's effectively a Marxist utopia. And Carol's abrasive manner isn't about to win them round...

It's a brilliant premise, albeit one which requires swallowing rather a lot about the nature of the "others" (who can't lie, or kill – or

“Seehorn is pitch-perfect, conveying steely determination”



"Where's that steward with my G&T?"

even just pick an apple). Once you have, there's so much to enjoy here. Seehorn's performance is pitch-perfect, conveying steely determination yet allowing flashes of vulnerability to surface. Gilligan luxuriates in the time available, staging a delicious James Bond pastiche, and dedicating most of an episode to the travails of fellow refusenik Manousos (Carlos-Manuel Vesga) as he sets out on

an epic journey from Paraguay.

It's a series with a uniquely wry, deadpan sense of humour, and some rare achievements. Few screen stories have so effectively crystallised the agony of loneliness, or the uncanny horror of AI; few make simple repetition so amusing. **Ian Berriman**

i Vince Gilligan has an unorthodox cameo: the head Carol finds in episode six was made by scanning his own.

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES TRILOGY

Heroes in Ultra HD

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★
 ► RELEASED OUT NOW!
 1990-1993 | PG | 4K/Blu-ray
 ► Directors Steve Barron, Michael Pressman, Stuart Gillard
 ► Cast Judith Hoag, Elias Koteas, Paige Turco, Vivian Wu

● In this era of VFX-powered blockbusters, there's a timeless charm to the animatronic heroes and practical effects of the original Ninja Turtles trilogy. The 1990 film, directed by Steve Barron, defies its low budget, making a virtue of shadowy locations to offer a surprisingly gritty image of New York. It's the strongest instalment, with energetic action

and believable chemistry between Judith Hoag's Lois Lane-alike reporter April O'Neil and Elias Koteas's scuzzy vigilante Casey Jones. The Turtles themselves, brought to life by Jim Henson's Creature Shop, still look great, charged with personality and life.

Michael Pressman's sequel changes tone and aesthetic, aiming for a pre-teen audience, never allowing the Turtles to use their signature weapons, relegating April to an expository role, and overplaying the comedy. Ernie Reyes Jr is the cypher for every kid watching as pizza delivery guy Keno, but he's oddly obnoxious. Thematically, it retreads the first

movie's message about fatherhood through the Turtles' relationship with mentor Splinter, and Vanilla Ice's ninja rap is excruciating.

Stuart Gillard's much-maligned third entry is certainly uneven, but boasts better action and pacing than Pressman's outing, plus impressive period sets and costumes. The main weaknesses are in the script; the concept of transporting the Turtles to 17th-century Japan feels original, but the defeat of villain Walker (Stuart Wilson in English cad mode) is entirely unconvincing.

● Extras Alongside sharp 4K restorations, this Arrow Video set boasts insightful new director audio commentaries on all three films, plus a second track on the original by podcaster Dave Baxter.

Disc one includes five interview featurettes: Steve Barron (14 minutes), four Turtle actors (18 minutes), producer Simon Fields (11 minutes), two Creature Shop staff (16 minutes), and Judith Hoag (20 minutes) – a lively storyteller, she clearly enjoyed her time on TMNT. Add the UK cut (no nunchakus!), a locations piece (13 minutes), alternate ending, and footage from the Korean release, and it's an impressive spread.

Disc two contains a great interview with composer John Du Prez (13 minutes) who discusses his work on the series and his overall approach to scoring, plus diverting conversations with puppet builder Kenny Wilson (eight minutes) and editor Steve Mirkovich (15 minutes). A 1991 behind-the-scenes featurette (28 minutes) plays like a sales pitch.

For TMNT III, actors Vivian Wu and Sab Shimono (14/10 minutes) share warm memories of the production, plus there's the alternate UK opening. There are trailers and galleries for all three films. The set also includes three posters, four stickers, eight trading cards, and a booklet. **David West**

i TMNT was one of the first feature films edited by the late Sally Menke, who became Quentin Tarantino's regular editor.



CRASH AND BURN

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★
 ► RELEASED OUT NOW!
 1990 | 15 | Blu-ray
 ► Director Charles Band
 ► Cast Paul Ganus, Megan Ward, Bill Moseley, Eva LaRue

● BLU-RAY DEBUT Another month, another 88 Films Blu-ray of a cheesy flick from Charles Band's Full Moon stable – and it feels terribly familiar. It's by the same writer as 88's September release *Shadowzone* – and boy, does it feel like it, being another post-apocalyptic "base under siege" tale which traps characters in a single location.

This time it's the staff of a dissident TV station, plus a George Michael-haired courier, confined by a "thermal storm". One of their number is a killer "Synthoid". Given the presence of Bill Moseley (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2's Chop Top*), it's no great mystery...

A blood-test scene echoes *The Thing*, but once you get through the flat, slow, opening stretches it feels more like a *The Terminator* rip-off. There are decent performances, and the cinematography is of a high standard. But the world-building is thin, the inclusion of a giant robot feels tacked-on, and Richard Band's score is inadequate. What would you expect when the Synthoid's identity is revealed, he's shot in the head, and a struggle ensues? Probably not weedy ambient.

● Extras Two commentaries: one featuring Charles Band (alongside Moseley) largely consists of amused observation. Full Moon experts Dave Wain and Matty Budrewicz supply useful info on "softening" script changes. Plus: archival Making Of (seven minutes); blooper reel (six minutes); trailer. **Ian Berriman**



Reviews

THE HOUSE WITH LAUGHING WINDOWS

A paint job

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

1976 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

► Director Pupi Avati

► Cast Lino Capolicchio,

Francesca Marciano, Gianni Cavina

BLU-RAY DEBUT In this atmospheric

Italian horror, an art restorer (Lino Capolicchio) is tasked with uncovering hidden portions of a gruesome fresco of Saint Sebastian, then drawn into a mystery as anonymous callers warn him off, and the man who commissioned the job meets a sticky end.

Made on a shoestring, Pupi Avati's film deploys many gothic tropes – wind-blown curtains, fog, creaky doors – but distinguishes

itself in a couple of respects. Firstly, by locating the horror within a supposedly peaceful rural landscape (Northern Italy's Po Valley). Secondly, via its gallimaufrey of oddball details: a deranged altar boy babbling about cooking rats; a fridge filled with snails; and the titular house, once home to painter/syphilitic madman Buono Legnani, which is daubed with giant smiling mouths.

On the way to a deranged twist there are striking compositions, bloody scenes, and (thanks to Francesca Marciano's coy love interest) a dash of eroticism. Whether it makes sense is another matter, but you're unlikely to care.

► Extras Shameless carry over a

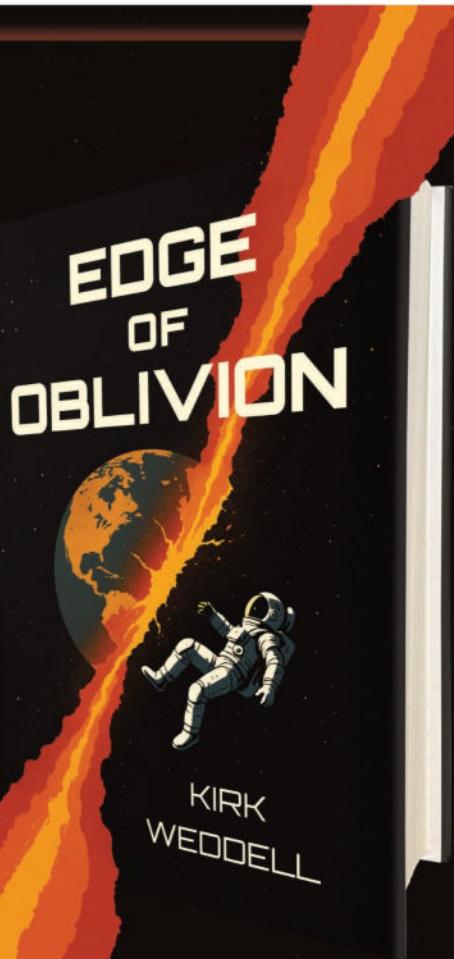
"Well, the agent did say it has original features."



20-minute chat with the director from their 2012 DVD; he talks about the influence of fairy tales and 1932's *Vampyr*. This 4K restoration adds four interviews, the most substantial (50 minutes) with a frail Capolicchio; as the actor died soon after, his delight at achieving a degree of cinematic immortality is doubly touching. We also hear from Marciano (14

minutes), producer Antonio Avati (33 minutes), and AD Cesare Bastelli (26 minutes). Common themes emerge: there was a "family feeling" on set; the crew of just 12 wore multiple hats. The 4K edition adds a booklet, two art cards, and a poster. **Ian Berriman**

i Lino Capolicchio had to visit a pharmacist while filming the finale, and caused alarm by forgetting he was covered in blood.



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NewScientist

Best New SCI-FI Books (December 2025)

SFX

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Holiday Special Issue 2025

★★★★★

"Sci-fi fans will enjoy decoding the clues hidden in the fascinating science."

Readers' Favorite (U.S.)

★★★★★



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POSSESSION

Bizarre Love Triangle



★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

1981 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

► Director Andrzej Żuławski

► Cast Isabelle Adjani, Sam Neill,

Margit Carstensen, Heinz Bennent

• **Though placed on the “video nasties” list, maverick Polish director Andrzej Żuławski’s harrowing drill-down into the horror implicit in long-term relationships is light years from the likes of *Mardi Gras Massacre*.**

Set by the Berlin Wall, it opens as a psychodrama. Sam Neill is Mark, who returns home to find that his wife (Isabelle Adjani) wants a separation. Hiring a private eye to tail her, he discovers that while Anna has a human lover, she’s ditched them both in favour of a squid-like creature she gave birth to. We’ve all been there.

Clinical lighting, a palette of shades of blue, and a handheld camera that often spins around the protagonists combine to create a sense of dizzying despair. The creature – the work of *ET*’s Carlo Rambaldi – is impressively revolting, Andrzej Korzyński’s score hauntingly brilliant.

It’s gruelling viewing, with intense performances – especially Adjani’s. At one point Anna experiences a breakdown in a dank subway tunnel; Żuławski instructed his star to pretend she was “f***king the air”. At other times, her expression recalls a female saint mid-ecstatic vision.

Adjani reportedly cut her wrists after seeing the final cut, while Neill has said he “escaped sanity barely intact”. Though you may not come away quite so traumatised, *Possession* is

categorically not a film to watch when you need a mood boost. But if you appreciate challenging cinema, you owe it to yourself to see it at least once.

• **Extras** Second Sight’s new 4K restoration offers both Żuławski’s cut and the US release – greatly truncated, with added psychedelic video effects and *The Omen*-esque music cues. Don’t bother, eh?

Żuławski expert Daniel Bird is all across the discs (a good thing). But there are other contributors. Guillermo del Toro ruminates thoughtfully (26 minutes), calling the film a “convulsion”. Kat Ellinger’s video essay (19 minutes) tackles topics like “the hysterical woman”; shame she didn’t bother finding out how to pronounce the director’s name. There’s also a new commentary by critics Alexandra Heller-Nicholas and Alison Taylor.

The US version has a fresh yack track too (by Bird/French critic Manuela Lazic). But the director’s commentary on his own cut (very well moderated by Bird) is all you really need; that or Bird’s team-up with co-writer Frederic Tuten.

Also new to this release (but dating from 1985) is a French TV doc on the director (52 minutes) which also speaks to his parents. But most bonuses are carried over from the 2013 Blu-ray. Korzyński (19 minutes) praises Żuławski for “always accepting non-clichéd ideas”. “Basha” (six minutes) discusses poster artist Barbara Baranowska. There are also pieces on locations (seven minutes) and the US cut’s atrocities (12 minutes).

The Bird-directed “The Other Side of The Wall” (52 minutes) is an excellent 2009 Making Of; among other things, it draws out the politics inherent in the West Berlin setting. Żuławski is candid in a 2009 interview (36 minutes), recalling pinning Adjani up against a door and threatening to “smash her head”. Yikes. Producer Christian Ferry also has his say (seven minutes). Plus: eight brief deleted scenes; trailer. The dual-format Limited Edition set includes a 220-page book of essays, a copy of the shooting script, and six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

i A fourth main character – Anna’s first husband – was cut from the film entirely after one day’s shooting with the actor.



OVER YOUR DEAD BODY

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

2014 | 18 | Blu-ray

► Director Takashi Miike

► Cast Ebizō Ichikawa,

Kō Shibasaki, Miho Nakanishi

• **BLU-RAY DEBUT** **Regular readers**

of this section should need no introduction to *Yotsuya Kaidan*; one of Japan’s most famous ghost stories, it’s been adapted for the screen countless times.

Takashi Miike’s 95th film takes a novel approach, mixing scenes of actors rehearsing a new stage version with glimpses behind the scenes, and also exploring their personal lives.

So famous sequences from the story are played out. We see amoral samurai Lemon kill a woman’s father in order to marry her. Then, tiring of their life together, he agrees to a proposal to ditch her, passing on poison which deforms her face. In parallel with this we observe tensions in the relationship of the two leads, both the object of sexual interest from other cast.

It’s an interesting concept, but it doesn’t really work. The rehearsals are handsomely mounted, using lavish sets on a rotating stage and artful lighting progressions. The bleak domestic scenes – which, as the slippage between fiction and reality increases, include more of the gore you might expect from the director of *Ichi The Killer* – soon come to feel like unwelcome intrusions.

• **Extras** A commentary by Miike expert Tom Mes is this 88 Films release’s main offering. It’s couched in such general terms that it feels like he forgot to bring his notes. Plus: gallery; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**



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RE-ANIMATOR

Talking head

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

1985 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

► Director Stuart Gordon

► Cast Jeffrey Combs, Bruce Abbott, Barbara Crampton, David Gale

• **Stuart Gordon's Lovecraftian** horror turned 40 in 2025. This extras-stuffed Second Sight set gives the film the love it deserves, presenting two distinct versions: the Theatrical Cut and an Integral Cut, which restores numerous scenes and run to 105 minutes.

Herbert West (Jeffrey Combs) is a morally bankrupt scientist who believes he has developed a cure for death. He takes a position at Miskatonic University, where he falls in with student Daniel Cain (Bruce Abbott) – but his experiments soon lead to disaster...

The film keeps an admirably straight face for its first act before

taking a hard lean into comedy with a detached (but still leery) head, rampaging zombies, and a sardonic performance from Combs. Four decades on it remains an influential classic.

• **Extras** The Theatrical Cut comes with three commentaries (critic Eddie Falvey; director Gordon; and a track featuring producer Brian Yuzna, Abbott, Combs, and co-stars Barbara Crampton and Robert Sampson).

Mike Muncer of podcast The Evolution of Horror offers a video essay on the Lovecraftian elements (nine minutes). "The Horror Of It All" (18 minutes) sees directors including Joe Lynch and Rob Savage discussing the film's importance. "Re-Animator at 40" (45 minutes) is a new interview with Crampton, Combs and Yuzna. There are also chats with editor Lee Percy (15 minutes) and

"How dare you say *From Beyond* is even better?!"



the late director's wife Carolyn Purdy-Gordon (14 minutes).

The new material is backed up with archival interviews with Gordon and Yuzna (49 minutes), writer Dennis Paoli (11 minutes), composer Richard Band (15 minutes), and ex-*Fangoria* editor Tony Timpone (five minutes). Barbara Crampton gets a career retrospective (36 minutes), taped at FrightFest. Also included are

2017 documentary "A Guide to Lovecraftian Cinema" (54 minutes) and 2007's "Re-Animator Resurrectus" (69 minutes). Plus: extended scenes (23 minutes); a deleted scene; trailer; TV spots; gallery. The Limited Edition 4K set comes with a 120-page book and six art cards. **Will Salmon**

i A curious subplot in the Integral Cut reveals that the evil Dr Cain is able to use mesmerism to control his victims.



WE BURY THE DEAD

★★★★★

► RELEASED 2 FEBRUARY

2025 | TBC | Digital

• **An elevated take on** zombies, this melancholy Aussie indie is heavy on big skies and watery eyes.

After an electromagnetic pulse-weapon test kills thousands in Tasmania – a few of whom then "reboot" – Daisy Ridley's plucky physical therapist volunteers to help clear up the bodies, but soon strikes out to find her husband.

CGI is used effectively to create a sense of scale, and the undead's penchant for grinding their teeth is an unnerving touch. But don't expect your heart to be broken. **Ian Berriman**



OMNISCIENT READER: THE PROPHECY

★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | Digital

• **This Korean fantasy sees** an apocalypse depicted in a cult novel become reality. *KPop Demon Hunters'* Ahn Hyo-seop is a loyal reader, battling kaiju and other threats to rewrite the ending for the world.

An intriguing premise is let down by empty, sub-*Matrix* superheroics and plotting inspired by videogame mechanics. There are flashes of spectacle, but the thrills feel perfunctory. **Nick Setchfield**



COYOTES

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!/5 JANUARY

2025 | 15 | Digital / Blu-ray/DVD

• **This lo-fi horror-comedy** earns goodwill for its gonzo sensibilities and savage sense of humour. But as a pack of coyotes stalk the Hollywood Hills home of a comic-book artist (Justin Long) while a wildfire intensifies the situation, there's nothing close to resembling genuine peril.

Decent visual effects and Long's razor-sharp delivery (and chemistry with real-life wife Kate Bosworth) provide a lift, but *Coyotes* lacks bite. • **Extras** Making Of (19 minutes). **Matt Maytum**



THE GREAT FLOOD

★★★★★

► RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | SVOD

NETFLIX An-Na (Kim Da-mi) wakes up in her apartment just as it starts to flood. As the water inexorably rises, she must carry her little boy up countless flights of stairs to reach safety on the building's roof – although her journey is more complex than it seems.

This South Korean movie – co-starring *Squid Game*'s Park Hae-soo – is impressively staged, but doesn't fully work as either an action film or a highbrow sci-fi concept movie, ending up a bit soggy in the middle. When it does click, however, it's genuinely chilling. **Meg Wilde**

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REFLECTION IN A DEAD DIAMOND



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | N/A | SVOD

► Directors Hélène Cattet,

Bruno Forzani

► Cast Fabio Testi, Yannick Renier, Koen De Bouw, Maria de Medeiros

SHUDDER From a gleaming

Jaguar E-Type to the sun-kissed coast of the French Riviera, this stylish, tricksy thriller declares itself an homage to the Eurospy genre of the '60s, all those glamorous, kitschy capers that arrived in 007's wake.

Fabio Testi is Diman, John Diman, a 70-something former "agent special" now living beyond his means on the Côte d'Azur, dining on Martinis and memories. The disappearance of a fellow guest at his high-class hotel retreat forces the ageing adventurer to confront his past, in particular an old female nemesis, Serpentik.

Homages abound: Serpentik's mask is clearly inspired by Italian fumetti icon Diabolik, the leathers and motorbike a nod to *Thunderball*'s Fiona Volpe. Her viciously graphic fight scenes hint at how Tarantino might bring Emma Peel to the screen. Elsewhere, endlessly inventive visuals reference everything from Bond title sequences to surrealist art.

But this isn't a continental *Austin Powers*. It's as much in the spirit of experimental European cinema as an exercise in style. The storytelling blurs reality and illusion, present and flashback; a meta commentary on spy movies themselves. Serpentik wears mask upon mask, and so does this dazzling, intriguing film. For more than your eyes only. **Nick Setchfield**



MAN FINDS TAPE



► RELEASED 19 JANUARY

2025 | TBC | Digital

► Directors Paul Glandersman,

Peter S Hall

► Cast Kelsey Pribilski,

William Magnuson, John Gholson

► The title may fill you with a sense of anticlimax – it's no *Man Bites Dog* – but this Texan-made indie is an above-average stab at the found footage genre. Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead are producers, and it has a whiff of the indie darlings' oeuvre.

Set in small town Larkin, it sees Kelsey Pribilski's Lynn returning home at the request of screw-up brother Lucas (William Magnuson). He's achieved a degree of viral fame after finding a tape which shows a figure entering his childhood bedroom at night. Now he's unearthed CCTV of townsfolk inexplicably freezing – which none can remember. Is Lucas's instinct that the local Reverend is involved correct?

It's a strong hook, made doubly engaging by the fact that merely watching said footage causes blackouts. The fractious relationship between the two siblings is well-played, grounding creepy goings-on in emotional verisimilitude. Brian Villalobos adds further intrigue as a mysterious stranger with an old doctor's bag.

The film doesn't always justify why a camera is running (why would Lynn, a reluctant participant, record herself driving?). And the answers are more vague than some may like. However, writer/directors Paul Glandersman and Peter S Hall probably get the balance right when it comes to maintaining a sense of mystery. **Ian Berriman**

(ROUND UP)



Time for our rundown of recent theatrical releases coming to shiny disc. In the dreamy romantic fantasy

A BIG BOLD BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), Colin Farrell and Margot Robbie's characters pass through doors that are portals into pivotal moments in their lives. We said: "The leisurely pace will be a problem for some, but there's much to admire in its controlled tonal balance, from the vivid lighting to the thought-provoking scenarios." Extras: three features (16 minutes). In **HIM**

(5 January, Blu-ray/DVD), a quarterback invited to train with his idol is drawn into a boot camp that's all creepy hangers-on, skull-heavy decor and punishing practices. We said: "The hallucinogenic visuals can be entrancing... But it doesn't build like you might expect it to." Extras: director's commentary, an alternate ending, six deleted scenes, two "Anatomy Of A Scene" pieces (nine minutes), and a further three featurettes (27 minutes). Adapted from Stephen King's 1979 dystopian novel.

THE LONG WALK (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) follows a last-man-standing event which rewards one competitor with unimaginable riches. We said: "A gruelling watch... What is surprising is how emotional it is. Screenwriter JT Mollner economically builds the relationships and a sense of community that intensifies as the numbers dwindle." Extras: presumably the same as the US release. That has a five-part *Making Of* (75 minutes) on the Blu-ray, with 16 minutes more goodies (alternate ending, an appreciation of King, and a "scene read") exclusive to 4K. A documentary crew looks into the disappearance of four

ghost-hunting YouTubers in **SHELBY OAKS** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), which starts off in wobble-cam-in-the-woods mode, then drops that for diversions into various horror subgenres. We said: "As patchy as it is creepy, its many surprises sometimes chilling but more often frustrating."

Bonuses: nada. Mask-wearing killers Dollface, Pin-Up Girl and Scarecrow are back in **THE STRANGERS: CHAPTER 2** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD), stalking plucky survivor Maya through the Oregon hamlet she's become marooned in. We said: "Flashbacks to the murderers' embryonic exploits in the playground add some texture, but you can't help sensing that a satisfyingly finite thriller's been stretched beyond its elasticity." Extras: commentary by star Madelaine Petsch and a producer; a 19-minute *Making Of*.

TRON: ARES (12 January, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees programs transferred from the Grid to the real world – including the titular Ares (Jared Leto), who begins to question his destiny once he experiences more of humanity. We said: "Director Joachim Rønning certainly makes it all look stylish... yet it's all in service of a slim plot that thinks it has dug up some big ideas but mostly falls back on contrivance and cliché."

Extras: five featurettes (35 minutes) and three deleted scenes. Finally, the latest TV box sets are Syfy's "the dead return in Wisconsin" show

REVIVAL Season One (12 January, Blu-ray/DVD) and **THE WALKING DEAD: DARYL DIXON** Season Three (out now, Blu-ray/DVD). **Oh, and fellow skinflint Whovians may like to know about the standard edition of DOCTOR WHO** Season 15 (12 January, Blu-ray).

DOUG CHIANG: THE CINEMATIC LEGACY/ THE STAR WARS LEGACY

Industrious light magician



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

800 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Authors Gilles Penso, Alexandre Poncet

► Publisher Abrams Books

“Doug doesn’t just design,” claims director Robert Zemeckis, paying tribute to legendary concept artist Doug Chiang. “He dreams in form, texture and light.”

This sumptuous two-book set (RRP £200) comprehensively maps that dreamscape. Volume

one, *The Cinematic Legacy*, provides the origin story: raised in Taiwan, haunted by local folklore and staging epic stick-figure battles on paper, the young Chiang relocates to Michigan, where a combination of shyness and unfriendly weather sees him retreat into the creative fiefdom of his bedroom. A teenage health scare bestows a sense of urgency that manifests in a prodigious work ethic and,

ultimately, a place in Hollywood.

Book one covers everything from *The Mask* to *Jumanji*, while the Force grows strong in companion volume *The Star Wars Legacy*. Recruited to lead the design team on *The Phantom Menace*, Chiang establishes a sleek new visual language for the galaxy far, far away before returning for the Lucas-less sequels and assorted spinoffs.

There’s plenty of commentary from the man himself – a self-effacing soul, troubled by imposter syndrome – but it’s the magnificent art that truly does the talking. Over 2,000 sketches, paintings and photos, many previously unpublished, showcase a brilliant, restless imagination, forever tweaking, refining, dreaming harder. **Nick Setchfield**

George Lucas used three rubber stamps when scrutinising concept art: “FABULOSO”, “OK” and “DEEP REGRET”.



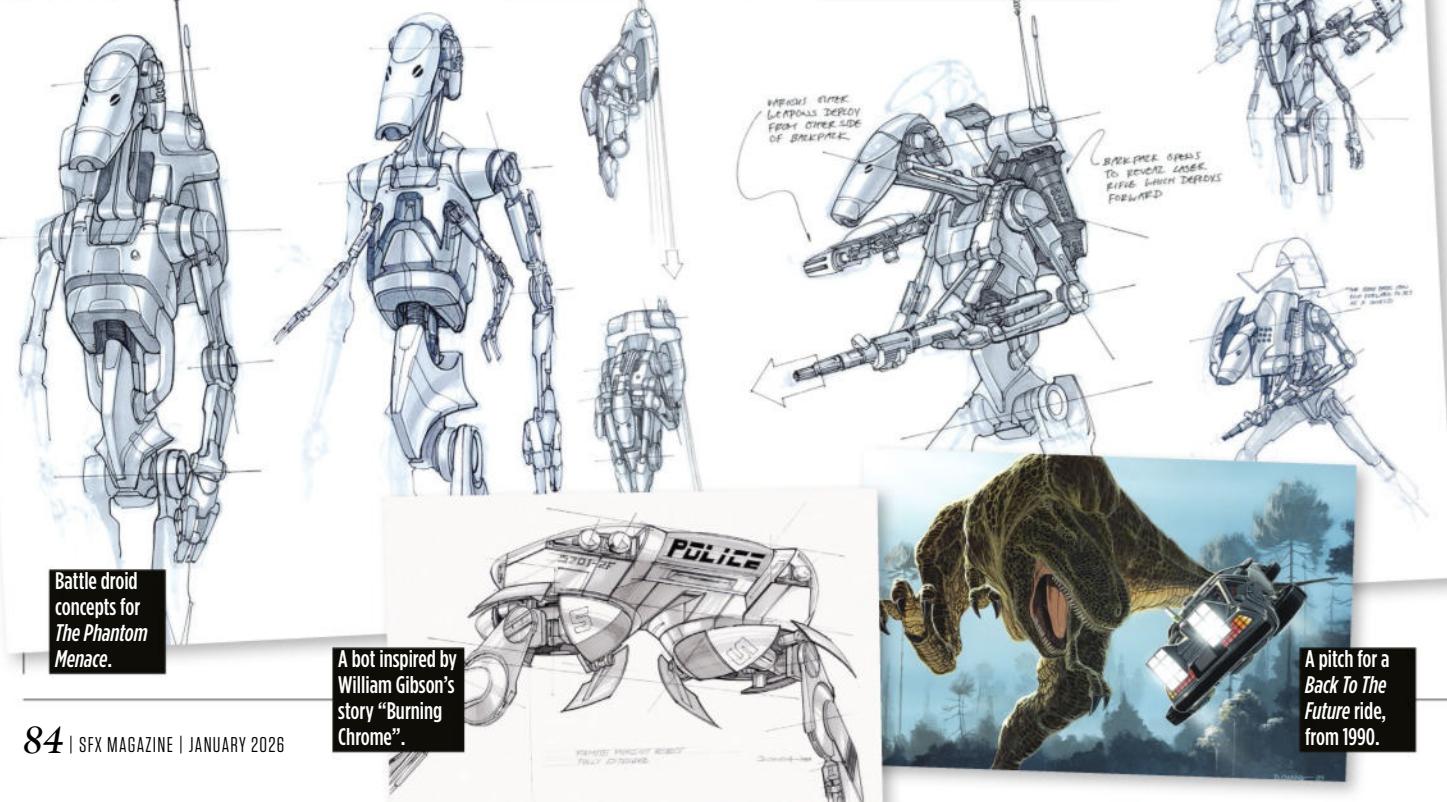
ARTWORK © 2025 DOUG CHIANG



Storyboards of the T-1000 going through prison bars.



T-1000 concepts for *Terminator 2*'s climax.

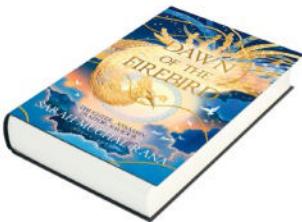


Battle droid concepts for *The Phantom Menace*.

A bot inspired by William Gibson's story "Burning Chrome".

A pitch for a *Back To The Future* ride, from 1990.

BRAND NEW FAN GUIDE



DAWN OF THE FIREBIRD



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

480 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Sarah Mughal Rana

► Publisher Bloomsbury Archer

• Persian mythology and Islamic theology mingle in Sarah Mughal Rana's Middle Eastern-flavoured fantasy. Khamilla is the neglected daughter of the Emperor of Azadniabad, a nation at war with their neighbours Sajamistan. When the Emperor is overthrown, Khamilla enrolls in the Sajamistani military, hoping to learn the enemy's secrets to use against them, but finds her loyalty torn.

Rana builds a rich world, with complex cultures and traditions. Her dialogue can be a little stiff, but the biggest challenges are the downbeat tone and impenetrable systems of magic and combat. Khamilla is a very dour narrator; while her young life is marked by loss and tragedy, she wallows in misery. Spurning all offers of friendship, Khamilla's endless anger, self-loathing and guilt threaten to become exhausting.

A large part of the story is devoted to Khamilla's training in Sajamistan, yet Rana employs arcane terms without explaining what they mean. Consequently, battles become a stream of confusing verbiage to rival any anime word salad – "I land in third stance and channel a 14-breath meditation, my bonds expanding into Second-Stratum." Similarly, the author presumes a working knowledge of Middle Eastern myths, which may leave readers heading for Wikipedia. **David West**



JUST SARAH



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

260 pages | Paperback

► Editor Philip Bates

► Publisher Candy Jar Books

• "Have you met Miss Smith?" asks the Doctor in "The Seeds Of Doom". "She's my best friend!"

Generations of fans can relate. Entering the TARDIS in December 1973, Sarah Jane Smith remains, for many, the archetypal *Doctor Who* companion. This collection of essays celebrates both the icon and the equally cherished, much-mourned Elisabeth Sladen, who played her.

The title's a bit of a misnomer: this isn't *just* Sarah. Some pieces use the character as a launch point, more engaged in exploring her debut season as a whole or staging a spirited defence of fellow companion Harry Sullivan (Ian Marter).

Elsewhere, the focus is firmly on the subject – though there's a genuinely fascinating detour about April Walker, the actor who won then lost the role before Sladen was cast.

Highlights include an impressively detailed analysis of the Sarah/Doctor relationship, complete with insights into body language, along with a welcome look at Sladen's career in general. There's also a comprehensive guide to Sarah's many returns across the decades.

Baz Greenland makes the best point at the very start of the book. Sarah isn't just the quintessential *Doctor Who* companion. To the Time Lord she's the quintessential human too, everything he's fighting for. No wonder she's his best friend (take it on the chin, K-9).

Nick Setchfield



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THE POET EMPRESS



► RELEASED 20 JANUARY

386 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Shen Tao

► Publisher Gollancz

⦿ Feuding princes, dying emperors and a magical system based on poetry are not especially original concepts, but they're given fresh life in this China-inspired debut.

Tensha is a country ravaged by famine, so when the call goes out for potential concubines to the notorious Prince Terren, heir to the throne, Wei puts herself forward. Desperate to gain royal favour and help save her family from starvation, she tells herself she can withstand his tortures, but quickly becomes convinced that the land needs to be saved from such a cruel leader. Terren has many magical defences, but there is one poem-spell that could kill him. The twist is that it's a poem that must be written with love – and how can she love a man who treats her so badly?

The Poet Empress is an often merciless tale of abuse, torture and starvation, but also compassion. As Wei searches for the truth behind Terren's brutality, she gains an understanding of his life that explains but never excuses his behaviour. It's a book filled with complicated characters, power plays and familial love, set in an epic world of literomancy and magical dynasty. Wei is enthralled and corrupted by the power she gains, but never loses sight of the ordinary families struggling to survive far from palace life. **Rhian Drinkwater**



WE CALL THEM WITCHES



► RELEASED 22 JANUARY

304 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author India-Rose Bower

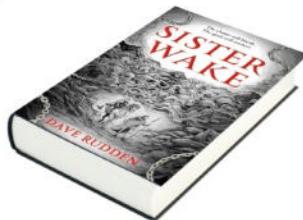
► Publisher Michael Joseph

⦿ They call them "witches", but they're nothing like your usual fairy-tale spellcasters.

The so-called witches here are indescribable eldritch abominations: nightmares that emerged from the shadows one day and brought about the apocalypse. They're all different – depending on their environment, they could be made from branches or binbags – but they all scream. As horror monsters go, they're pretty inventive.

The thing is, everything else about this too-brief novel is extremely generic. Our heroine Sara and her family are on the run from the witches, and all the usual survival horror tropes apply: they struggle for food, take shelter where they can, and have to be careful of outsiders. One day, another survivor arrives at their camp, causing friction between Sara and her siblings as they argue over whether to trust her.

It's a zombie apocalypse story in all but name – a genre most horror fans are way too familiar with at this point. There's a glimmer of something more interesting in its final chapters, but the book ends without really exploring it. It sort of feels like someone dropped half the pages down the back of the printer. It's not that it's bad; the writing is evocative, even a bit spooky sometimes. But it does feel rather pointless. **Sarah Dobbs**



SISTER WAKE



► RELEASED 15 JANUARY

546 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Dave Rudden

► Publisher Hodderscape

⦿ Colonialism, faith and

identity lie at the heart of Dave Rudden's *Sister Wake*, an epic fantasy inspired by the English occupation of Ireland.

The oppressed in this instance are the Croi, whose homeland is under the control of The Answering nation. The latter fancy themselves as rational and scientific, banning the Croi's indigenous religion, a conviction sorely challenged when the Croi's gods reappear to trail chaos and destruction across the land.

The story unfolds from three perspectives. Sister Wake is the saint of the Goddess Of Death, possessing the necromantic power to animate the dead; Abelard is a member of the Answering aristocracy searching for answers about the gods' return; and Talasa is stepdaughter to the Answering King, navigating intrigues at court for the Queen.

The central theme that emerges is one of self-determination, as each of the protagonists and the Croi themselves strive to steer their own destiny. The world-building is expansive, and there's a streak of horror in the primal, animalistic fear evoked by the sight of a towering, unknowable god. The ending is the trickiest moment in plot terms, relying on a character that Rudden keeps offstage throughout the rest of the book, but the energy of the writing and strong characters help carry it off. **David West**



GODSTORM



► RELEASED 15 JANUARY

352 pages | Hardback/ebook/
audiobook

► Author Solitaire Townsend

► Publisher Bedford Square

Publishers

⦿ Welcome to an alternate

17th century, where the Roman Empire's still going strong, mainly thanks to the early discovery of oil and the creation of the combustion engine. In a heavily polluted London, a gladiatrix-turned-indentured governess called Arrow (there's a lot of backstory here, revealed in flashbacks throughout) attends to Livy, the adopted daughter of a powerful patrician.

When Livy is kidnapped by hairy pagans, Arrow ignores her master and gives chase. Calling in help from an old gladiatorial sparring partner, she embarks on a journey that takes her halfway across the world to the Amazon. There she learns the truth about Livy's parentage, and discovers a clean technology that threatens the Empire's global stronghold.

An entertaining, fast-paced petrol-punk romp with a green message and a hint of lesbian romantasy, *Godstorm* is almost charmingly corny at times. The alt-history Roman Empire is a fun setting, but first-time novelist never really gets under its skin before we're whisked off to South American rainforests full of warrior women. The cast is predominantly female, and the men are predominantly awful and/or idiotic.

As an eco-satire, it's not exactly Orwellian; think more H Rider Haggard with a social conscience. **Dave Golder**



GODFALL



► RELEASED 8 JANUARY

374 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Van Jensen
► Publisher Bantam

⦿ **Having an attention-** grabbing “what if?” question is often a vital ingredient for a sci-fi/fantasy novel, and new thriller *Godfall* certainly delivers a doozy of a premise.

The story takes place in Little Springs, a Nebraska town that's utterly insignificant... until a three-mile-tall alien corpse falls from the sky just outside it. Two years later, the town is now a rapidly expanding research site, while local sheriff David Blunt is having to deal with a host of new problems – including a serial killer who's somehow connected to the dead alien giant.

Comics writer Van Jensen does a good job of tapping into a Stephen King-adjacent tone as the book evolves into a twisty murder mystery with a light dusting of weird sci-fi. At the same time, Jensen is also exploring the various tensions in Little Springs between the town's original inhabitants and the multitude of new arrivals, giving us plenty of well-characterised conflict (and more potential murder suspects).

Like King, Jensen often paints with a broad brush, but he keeps the mystery entertaining while pulling off some impactful action sequences. It's a pity *Godfall* never fully embraces the lurid strangeness of its premise, remaining a sturdy thriller that falls just a little short of being truly shocking or surprising.

Saxon Bullock



ARBORESCENCE



► RELEASED 15 JANUARY

304 pages | Hardback/ebook

► Author Rhett Davis
► Publisher Fleet

⦿ **Some stories give readers** lots of information on how their high concepts work and what their worlds look like. Others, well... they're mostly just vibes. Here's an early contender for Most Vibes Book of 2026.

People are turning into trees. At first, it's laughed off like an urban legend, but then it happens in some undeniably public contexts and becomes big news. Caelyn, an early believer, is catapulted to fame for her academic research on the phenomenon. Her partner Bren is left behind, caring for his parents and watching the world change.

How does it work? Vibes. What is Caelyn's expertise? Vibes. How much time is passing? Vibes. Should I know who this person is? Vibes. Why are so many scenes in this book just two sentences long? Vibes.

It's a great concept, and there's plenty of thought-provoking speculation on what it all means: it's about isolation, or climate change, or love, or death. There are some undeniably moving moments, particularly when it comes to the pain of watching loved ones dying in slow motion. But there's no real forward drive to keep us going between these moments: the structure is bitty and impressionistic, even by literary fantasy standards, and the protagonists are more collections of aphorisms than people. Nic Clarke



THE ELSEWHERE EXPRESS



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Samantha Sotto Yambao
► Publisher Bantam

⦿ **When Raya dozes off on the** subway, she doesn't simply end up at the end of the line – she finds herself on the mysterious Elsewhere Express. This magical locomotive hurtles through infinity, powered by dreams, songs and spells, filled with people who've checked out of their mundane existence and into another life.

Once aboard, Raya meets troubled painter Q and a conductor named Lily, who asks for their help in tracking down a stowaway. And so they bounce from carriage to carriage – breaking laws of physics, common sense and reality – in a curious melding of *Snowpiercer*, *Spirited Away* and *Murder On The Orient Express*.

There's no denying author Samantha Sotto Yambao's astonishing imagination, which has furnished her trundling transport with so many magical ideas that there can't be any room left in her head for things such as bill-paying or laundry. But that's also a problem, as this book is just one chapter after another of characters explaining things to our two overwhelmed leads. By the time the plot finally starts moving forwards, our own brains are threatening to burst. This is a staggering achievement, but like a train trip during a rail strike, the journey can be frustrating. In small doses, however, it's a fabulous ride.

Jayne Nelson

REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks is Arkady Martine's **ROSE/HOUSE** (★★★★★, 8 January, Tor).

It centres on a house embedded with a “haunt” – an AI – that phones the police to let them know there's a dead body inside. A detective's attempts to identify said body are complicated by the fact that Rose House has no desire to grant entry to its inner sanctums. We said: “A locked-room murder mystery that's atmospheric and beautifully plotted... Don't expect jump scares, but do expect to sleep uneasily.” Kylie Lee Baker's **BAT EATER** (★★★★★, 8 January, Hodder)

centres on a woman who witnessed her sister being pushed in front of a train by a racist thug. Now,

working as a crime scene clearer, she realises that there's a serial killer targeting East Asian women.

And then the hungry ghosts show up... We said: “It's a vibrant, pulsatingly righteous response to the horrors around us, and it's masterfully done.” Finally, Nnedi Okorafor's latest has two interweaving narratives, and contains strong elements of autobiography. **DEATH OF THE AUTHOR** (★★★★★, 15 January, Gollancz) centres on a writer of literary fiction who switches tack to write *Rusted Robots*, a book about androids and AI after the extinction of humanity. Expect the lines between fiction and reality

to begin to blur... We said: “The structure represents a literary high-wire act, and Okorafor never looks like losing her balance... The book's connected narratives fit together beautifully.”



BULLET TIME A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



DUNE: BENE GESSERIT – TAROT DECK AND GUIDE

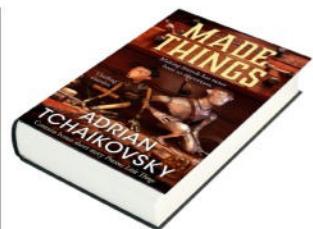
► RELEASED 6 JANUARY

128 pages | Hardback/card deck

► Author Minerva Siegel

► Publisher Titan Books

- A tarot deck with illustrations by Sarah Rain Hammond, themed around *Dune* – specifically the Denis Villeneuve movies.
- Includes a book by Minerva Siegel, which explains each card, with in-universe reference to various *Dune* characters.
- It's a 78-card deck, split into a 22-card Major Arcana and 56-card Minor Arcana, with added *Dune* allusions.
- The cards are high quality and nicely illustrated, but lack the deep symbolism in decks like the Rider-Waite.
- The book is dryly witty, with the references to *Dune* characters smartly woven in.
- High-quality, but more of a cool tie-in than a practical tarot deck.



MADE THINGS



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

224 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Adrian Tchaikovsky

► Publisher Tor

● **Good things often come** in small packages, as this latest Adrian Tchaikovsky release demonstrates, both textually and metatextually. Because it's a novella and it's about small things: animate dolls known as homunculi, who make themselves from various materials – wood, metal, paper, cloth, wax – and live secretly alongside humans in a fantasy city where magic is divided along class lines.

It's a beguiling curate's egg of a novella. Written in the style of a dark fairy tale, with elements of heist fiction, social satire and horror, it's packed with intriguing, evocative imagery and quirky characters (the main human character is a thief and puppet maker called Coppelio, which kids today would probably call an Easter egg if they knew anything about 19th-century ballet or classic literature). There's even an extra: a short story delving into the event which forced the homunculi diaspora out into the human world, suggesting that Tchaikovsky intends to explore this world further in future.

But it seems odd to launch a new world in novella form, especially a world so rich and complex. A lot of the background is delivered in (admittedly elegant) infodumps, and even then some details feel vague. It ends up feeling a little bit like an outline pitch for a Guillermo del Toro movie. **Dave Golder**



CITY OF OTHERS



► RELEASED 13 JANUARY

384 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

► Author Jared Poon

► Publisher Orbit

● **There's more than a whiff** of *Slow Horses* about this book's premise, which focuses on a group of overworked and underpaid civil servants fighting bad guys with no thanks from their superiors. That's where the similarities end, however, as this motley crew live in Singapore, aren't fully human, and are Scooby-ganging their way towards saving the world from another dimension filled with giant piranha-things.

Oh, and instead of being led by a grubby Gary Oldman, their leader is the tightly wound Ben – whose hunky boyfriend Adam may well be the key to everything. No farts here; just a sweet love story.

Jared Poon can whip up gorgeously evocative prose, with his descriptions of supernatural or internal worlds, and the feelings they inspire, almost bursting from the page. His dialogue isn't quite at the same level, however, with his cast of supporting characters feeling rather flimsy – more like sketched concepts that haven't quite come to fruition.

But there's a warmth to this unloved government department (DEUS) that means you end up rooting for them all. This is the first (self-contained) novel in a series named The DEUS Files: perhaps, as the books continue, this little gang of superpowered fighters will develop into the fully rounded characters they deserve to become. **Jayne Nelson**

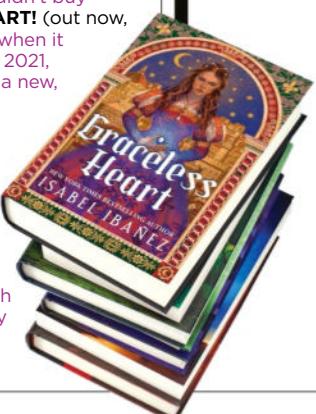
ALSO OUT

Set in Renaissance Italy, Isabel Ibañez's fantasy romance **GRACELESS HEART** (15 January, Hodder & Stoughton) centres on a sculptress whose magical talent leads to her being kidnapped and taken to Florence. And the Pope is taking an interest in her abilities, too...

Jennifer Ross's **EVERY LIFETIME AFTER** (15 January, HQ) centres on an A-list Hollywood star who, on arriving at a Yorkshire estate for her next project (a wartime romance), finds herself slipping into the life of its heroine. Can a vampire hunter ever fall in love with a vampire? Er, yes, obviously. Anyhow, that's the question posed by Annie Summerlee's **THE BOOK OF BLOOD AND ROSES** (15 January, Michael Joseph), a sapphic romance centred on a university in the Scottish highlands. If you're looking for something for a youngling aged around nine to 12, Rowan Foxwood's **MAGPIE GIRL** (1 January, Usborne) sounds charming. The titular lass grows feathers, talks to birds, and has a talent for finding lost things. When an ex-pal's dad goes missing, they set out on a rescue mission.

Demigorgonzola cheese balls is one of the 60+ recipes in **THE OFFICIAL STRANGER THINGS COOKBOOK** (6 January, Random House Worlds), along with the secret to Hopper's perfect tuna melt. How have we survived without it all this time? Finally, *Who* fans: if you didn't buy **EXTERMINART!** (out now, Candy Jar) when it came out in 2021, there's now a new, updated paperback edition.

It collects Dalek-themed art by Doctor Who artist Andrew Skilleter, with commentary and early sketches.



THE WRITE STUFF

THE SFX AUTHOR
QUESTIONNAIRE



Peter F Hamilton

The sci-fi author has actually been *read up in space*

What is your daily writing routine like?

► I spend the morning going over what I wrote the previous day, trying to improve it, then write new stuff in the afternoon. Then repeat – without end.

Describe the room in which you typically write.

► I write in my office, which I've managed to get down to a minimalist ideal over the last couple of years. It now has one desk, one chair, three bookshelves and plenty of pictures on the walls, including a framed envelope autographed by Buzz Aldrin that I bought in a charity auction.

Do you have any personal mementos or knick-knacks on your desk?

► My 2012 Inkpot Award from San Diego Comic-Con. Also a "Sonnie's Edge" [Hamilton's 1991 short story] mug that's a nest for pens and pencils.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

► I have music on all the time I'm writing. There's a lot of '70s and '80s albums on my hard drive, but I do have newer albums as well – I have a preference for rock bands and singer-songwriters.

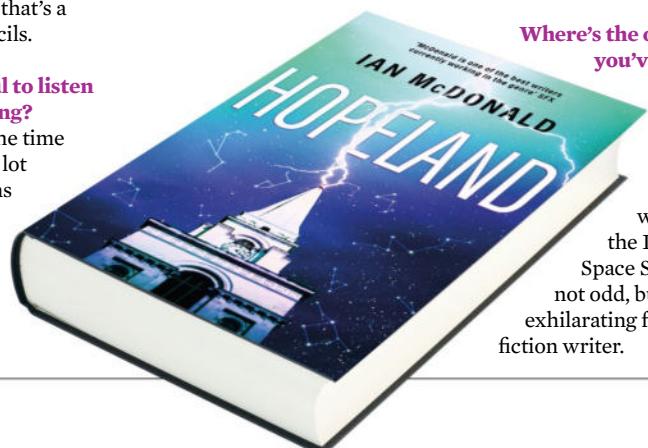
Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

► The Exodus books. Not difficult exactly, but the time dilation effect, which is a big part of the story, was hell to keep straight in my head. Several characters set off from one world, flying at relativistic speed to different stars, then they all had to be brought back together at the same time. Even with detailed notes, that was hard to track.

What would be your desert-island book?

► Currently, *Hopeland* by Ian McDonald – but this category does change on a regular basis.

“The time dilation was hell to keep straight in my head”



Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

► Ian McDonald for his prose. Iain M Banks for coming up with The Culture. Adrian Tchaikovsky for productivity.

If you could recommend one book that you love, but that's not very well known, what would it be?

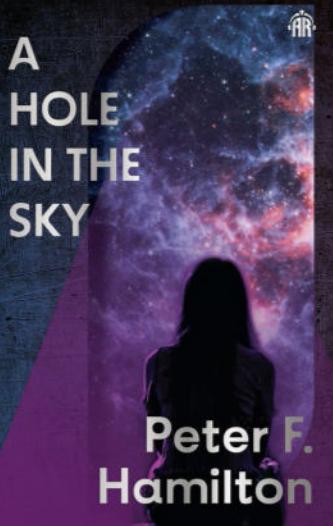
► *Way Station* by Clifford Simak [1963]. I read it decades ago, and it's very much of its time, but I'd argue that it's aged well. It's very different to anything I write, but still incorporates a galactic empire, even though the story never leaves Earth.

Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?

► *Project Hanuman* by Stewart Hotston.

Where's the oddest place you've seen one of your books?

► There's a NASA list which shows *Pandora's Star* was taken up to the International Space Station. So maybe not odd, but certainly exhilarating for a science fiction writer.



What's the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

► That it's an exciting profession with adventurous travel for research, and of course all writers earn a fortune.

What's the most frustrating thing about being a professional author?

► That it's a nine-to-five job, working from home the whole time even for research, and I don't get million pound advances. ●

A Hole In The Sky by Peter F Hamilton is out on 20 January, published by Angry Robot.



KATE HAMILTON

ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN: BOOK OF EL

The Twin Dilemma



RELEASED OUT NOW!

► Publisher DC Comics
► Writer Phillip Kennedy Johnson
► Artist Scott Godlewski

ISSUES 1-4 **The Man of Steel** has been having a big 2025 thanks to James Gunn's big-screen *Superman* reboot, but DC has also been making a serious effort with the "Summer of Superman" initiative, producing a variety of celebratory series to draw the attention of interested readers.

Some, like *Superman Unlimited*, are obviously intended as jumping-on points – but then you have *Adventures Of Superman*:

Book Of El, which is tied to some of the more convoluted recent Superman continuity.

It's actually a direct follow-up to writer Philip Kennedy Johnson's run on *Action Comics*, which concluded in 2023, with the plot revolving around two characters introduced in that run – "Super-Twins" Otho-Ra and Osul-Ra, Kal-El's newly adopted children. Just to make things more complicated, it's also a sequel to the 2021 one-shot special *Future State: Superman: House Of El* (also written by Johnson), which portrayed the descendants of Kal-El still fighting for justice in the far future.

In these first four issues, the plot is kicked off when one-time Superman ally Kryl-Ux taps into a god-like power that will enable him to resurrect his dead children, but in order to do so, he has to abduct Otho-Ra and Osul-Ra.

When Kal-El tries to stop Kryl-Ux, he's catapulted 1,000 years into the future, into a nightmarish alternate timeline where Superman has been missing for a millennia and is now just a myth. To set this right, Superman has to enlist the aid of his descendant Ronan Kent (previously seen in the *House Of El* special).

For all the overcomplicated setup, these first four issues are a bright and enjoyable read packed with energetic set pieces. Johnson's world building captures a fun mix of lurid sci-fi and mythic fantasy, and while there have been a multitude of previous "dark superhero futures", this one pulls off distinctive moments without ever losing the colourful, earnest heart that every good Superman comic needs.

On art duties, Scott Godlewski brings a kinetic style to the action sequences, keeping the storytelling clear and brisk while adding sincerity to the quieter, more character-based moments.

He also showcases some fun design choices in the future world that Superman is now stranded in; together, he and Johnson make an engaging storytelling team.

Book Of El may not be especially new-reader friendly, but for those willing to play catch-up, this is a healthy dose of colourfully entertaining superhero adventure.

Saxon Bullock

i At one point, a red Police Box can be seen among a variety of artefacts in the Fortress of Solitude.



STAR TREK: RED SHIRTS



RELEASED OUT NOW!

► Publisher IDW Publishing
► Writer Christopher Cantwell
► Artist Megan Levens

ISSUES 1-5 **Rather than famous** figures such as Captain Kirk, this five-parter (set during the first year of *The Original Series*) refreshingly gives a voice to the usually anonymous security officers whose sole purpose is to serve as cannon fodder – although given the high body count, it's hard to get attached to any of the 12-strong cast.

With #1 opening with Ensign Chip Miller almost getting his eyeball ripped out by a Mugato, Christopher Cantwell's script contains more visceral violence and gallows humour than most *Star Trek* comics. There's also a darker undertone, as the crew of the USS Warren embark on a mission to a snowy planet to track down some spies who are attempting to steal some classified secrets.

Depicting the deaths in gloriously gruesome detail, Megan Levens imbues the characters with real individuality. With the emphasis initially on slaughtering the unfortunate Red Shirts in imaginatively gory ways, the pace is slow at first, but momentum really builds once both the Klingons and Romulans get involved, leading to some developments that cast Starfleet in a murky light.

There's a treacherous twist in the tail worthy of John le Carré, and an unexpected cameo, as well as the prospect of a sequel – this time, some Red Shirts may get to fight another day.

Stephen Jewell



The Gunn vs Snyder debate quickly got out of hand.



PIG WIFE



► RELEASED 13 JANUARY

► Publisher Top Shelf Productions
► Writer Abbey Luck
► Artists Abbey Luck, Ruka Bravo

GRAPHIC NOVEL This hefty debut from Abbey Luck is a bold and sometimes bewildering epic that feels a little like *Alice In Wonderland* meets *Barbarian*.

Teenage Mary is wary when she, her mother Vee and overbearing stepfather Roger visit a dilapidated mansion in a remote mining town that once belonged to Roger's late aunt Pearl. He's landed himself in a sticky financial situation and is hoping that finding Pearl's missing will might provide him with the money needed to get out of trouble.

When an argument between the three spirals out of control, however, Mary flees into the night, eventually tumbling into a labyrinth of abandoned mines. There she meets Ed and Tommy, who are hiding out from a supposed apocalypse. As Mary struggles to find her way home, she has to confront her youthful assumptions about her parents, discover the truth behind Ed and Tommy's origins – and avoid becoming an unwilling bride.

Luck and Ruka Bravo's art alternates between an almost naive simplicity and scenes of technical brilliance that border on the psychedelic. This is a long book – 540 pages – but its scope is justified by the multigenerational nature of the story being told and the sheer energy with which Luck relays her tale. It's also *tremendously* sad in its depiction of the impact that neglect and carelessness can have on vulnerable people. **Will Salmon**



Looks like
Batman has a
new archery
nemesis. Arf.

BATMAN/DEADPOOL

The Odd Couple



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

► Publisher DC Comics
► Writers Various
► Artists Various

ONE-SHOT The second of DC and Marvel's big crossover issues is arguably more significant for its behind-the-scenes talent than its A-list heroes. Writing the headline story is Grant Morrison, one of the defining comics voices of the last 40 years, but someone who hasn't done much work in the medium for a few years now.

Their story, illustrated by Dan Mora, captures the motormouthed tone of Ryan Reynolds's Deadpool perfectly. What's more surprising is Morrison's positioning of Batman not as a weary straight man, but as a wry observer of the lunacy around him – as he points out at one point, given that his arch-enemy is a murderous clown, Wade Wilson's bullshit isn't likely

“The plot is nonsense, but the jokes are good”

to phase him. The plot is nonsense, but the jokes are good.

The back-up stories are less exciting, but still represent an impressive roster of comics creatives. "A Magician Walks Into A Universe" pairs up John Constantine with Dr Strange in a story from Scott Snyder, James Tynion IV, Joshua Williamson and Hayden Sherman, one which probes at Marvel and DC's tonal differences. "Sticks And Snicks", by Tom Taylor and Bruce Redondo, teams up Nightwing and the Laura Kinney Wolverine – two "nepo heroes" who find connection while chasing down Killer Croc.

The latter two stories are too brief (at five pages each) to make any impact, though. "Hulk And Harley's Amazin' Saturday!" by Mariko Tamaki and Amanda Conner raises a smile, but "New Friends In Old Places", by G Willow Wilson and Denys Cowan, has nothing to say about Static or Ms Marvel as they tackle a generic monster. **Will Salmon**

i Morrison's story reintroduces The Writer, a fictional avatar created for their fan-favourite run on *Animal Man*.



UNIVERSAL MONSTERS: THE INVISIBLE MAN



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

► Publisher Image Comics
► Writer James Tynion IV
► Artist DaNi

ISSUES 1-4 The Image Comics reinventions of legendary movie monsters just keep on coming, and the latest is a reinterpretation of the classic tale of invisibility, with James Tynion IV returning to script duties after his success on *Universal Monsters: Dracula*.

Unlike the more radical comic remixes like *The Mummy* or *Creature From The Black Lagoon*, this miniseries plays as a moody, unsettling prequel to the 1933 film (itself adapted from HG Wells's 1897 novel). We follow Jack Griffin, quietly egomaniacal scientist, as his desire to break out of society's rigid structures and rules leads him towards the discovery of invisibility.

These four issues track his descent into full-on madness, and as in the original movie, there's no attempt to redeem or humanise Griffin. He's a monster from the start, and the script makes this a clammy, claustrophobic read, aided by the characterful art from Dani, which gives the series plenty of atmospheric menace alongside some luridly grotesque shocks.

The slow-burn approach and lack of change in the character do leave this prequel feeling a little overlong at four issues. But while this isn't the best of the Universal Monsters revamps, there's still enough atmosphere and chills to make it worthy of attention. **Saxon Bullock**

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

Don't Panic



► Running until 15 FEBRUARY
► Venue Riverside Studios, London
► Production company
Mostly Harmless UK Productions

IMMERSIVE THEATRE **Life, the**

universe and everything is a tall order for any stage offering, but this ambitious adaptation of Douglas Adams's seminal saga has a decent stab at translating its lunacy into a sprawling chunk of immersive theatre, one which straddles three spaces of a London venue where *Doctor Who* once filmed in the '60s.

We begin in the Horse and Groom pub, where alien-in-

disguise Ford Prefect is waiting to startle dressing gown devotee Arthur Dent with a surprise farewell party. Vogons are en route to destroy Earth, though not before Ford and Dent's comely blind date Fenchurch has had time for a karaoke pop battle: the first sign of how freely writer Arvind Ethan David intends to treat the work of an author whose *Dirk Gently* series he adapted for television in 2016.

From here, we are shuffled into the white-walled interior of Zaphod Beeblebrox's Heart of Gold spacecraft, with the titular Guide – narrated by Tamsin Greig – serving as our polite and

informative host. No sooner have we got settled, though, we are shepherded into another auditorium, where a host of Adams' creations – Marvin the Paranoid Android, the snot-worshipping Jatravartids and planet designer Slartibartfast among them – are waiting to assail us with interplanetary trivia, some awkward audience participation and yes, more over-miked karaoke.

It's all rather chaotic, in truth, with extended periods of aimless milling about that we suspect is designed to tempt you towards the on-site bars hawking pricey liquid refreshments. Yet, there are

“Has a decent stab at translating the lunacy”

moments that cut through the confusion, among them a *Brief Encounter*-inspired interlude that finds Arthur romancing a Fenchurch rendered virtually in '40s monochrome.

Purists will doubtless be vexed by some of David's choices, which include relegating lead character Trillian (Lenora Crichlow) to a fleeting on-screen cameo. Yet, it's hard not to feel a grudging admiration for the creative and ingenious staging, with a repurposed Zorb Ball earning its keep towards the end as a pendulous "Total Perspective Vortex", which a selected few ticket holders are inveigled to stick their heads into.

It might not be prefect, but this *Hitchhiker's* is mostly harmless, and has just enough good points to make it worth a punt. **Neil Smith**

i Sanjeev Bhaskar throws some unspeakable poetry into the mix as the voice of virtual alien Prosthetic Vogon Jeltz.



Marvin's *Titanic* reenactment was fittingly depressing.



MARVEL COSMIC INVASION



► RELEASED OUT NOW!
► Reviewed on PC
► Also on Nintendo Switch/2, PS 4/5, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S
► Publisher Dotemu

VIDEOGAME **A new threat has** emerged in the Marvel universe, as Annihilus has unleashed his army of bugs across the realms. Heroes from all corners of the Marvel canon are called upon to team up and drive them back.

Reminiscent of the arcade heyday of gaming, *Cosmic Invasion* feels retro in the best ways, with modern touches that remove the sheer frustration of that era designed to eat your money.

However, it's not just classic brawlers, as another piece of Marvel royalty – its fighting game crossovers with Capcom – is a key inspiration. This makes for incredibly satisfying encounters as you take two heroes from the massive roster with you in every stage. These dynamic duos allow you to take combos to the next level as you call them in for an assist.

While familiar faces like Wolverine and Thanos are obviously here, one of the game's best aspects is just how deep some of the pulls are; you'll be able to play as Cosmic Ghost Rider and Beta Ray Bill as you fight against Beetle. It's packed full of Marvel fan service, and the universe-spanning plot allows for every inch of the canon to be explored. It may not be revolutionary, but it's solid arcade fun.

Scott McCrae



METROID PRIME 4: BEYOND



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

- Reviewed on Nintendo Switch 2
- Also on Nintendo Switch
- Publisher Nintendo

VIDEOGAME **Samus Aran**

returns after almost two decades for this long-awaited revival of Nintendo's first-person-shooter sci-fi series.

"FPS" doesn't quite do these games justice, however. While this bounty hunter can win energy-blaster firefights against space pirates or angry wildlife like the best of them, just as much emphasis is placed on exploring alien environments and taking in details as there is in wrecking them. For Samus, scanning ancient ruins and the ecology around her can be just as vital for pushing forward as a barrage of rockets.

On Nintendo Switch 2, these spaces are gorgeous, full of colour and delightfully weird, with each discovery combining to tell a story of how a civilisation fell to ruin without heavy use of cutscenes. Trapped on Viewros after a cosmic event, understanding the planet's history is Samus's only chance of escape.

That returning style of exploration action is better than ever, but Samus's new toolkit doesn't quite match up. On less familiar ground, *Metroid Prime* tries perhaps too hard to justify its lengthy absence. New psychic powers are clunky to use, feeling like the Nintendo Wii gimmicks of old. And a far too big and empty dune-y overworld that connects each level is dull to navigate, even on a flashy futuristic motorcycle.

Oscar Taylor-Kent



THE HUNGER GAMES: ON STAGE

Playing to win



► RELEASED OUT NOW!

- Booking until 25 October
- Venue Troubadour Canary Wharf Theatre
- Production company Runaway Entertainment

STAGE PLAY This live adaptation of Suzanne Collins's original *The Hunger Games* novel also takes many visual details – and sometimes characterisations – from the Lionsgate movie.

The original premise remains the same: children are chosen from the regional districts of the dystopian nation of Panem and forced to fight to the death for the amusement of viewers watching at home.

There are some very minor changes that fans might nitpick at, plus plenty of Easter eggs for the hardcore, but all in all it's business as usual, just sometimes hanging above you in mid-air.

Much has been made of the "brand-new, state-of-the-art venue" – it's a theatre, but not like anything you've previously seen.

With 1,200 seats all around, it feels more like an arena. But that's necessary, given the extent of the production. It's literally a show of many moving parts – the seating itself even shifts around to accommodate the action. At one point, a burning chariot flies overhead. At others, the contestants battle it out above the audience, or emerge from below. It's almost a dance, given how precise the choreography must be.

But all of this detracts from the story somewhat, which feels lacking in actual danger or consequence. It doesn't help that video appearances from John Malkovich as President Snow feel stilted and phoned in. It's certainly a breathtaking spectacle, but the production doesn't necessarily bring anything new to the story – rather, it's just another different way to consume it. Still, at least it's not *The Hunger Games: On Ice*.

Darren Scott

i Mia Carragher, who plays Katniss, is the daughter of former Liverpool and England footballer Jamie Carragher.



DOCTOR WHO: THE MIND TRAP



► RELEASED 8 JANUARY

- Running time 78 minutes
- Format CD/download
- Publisher BBC Audiobooks

AUDIOBOOK **Don't let the title**

mislead you. This original audiobook isn't a sequel to Patrick Troughton story "The Mind Robber", even if it features the same TARDIS team – and makes a plot point out of Zoe's silver catsuit from that 1968 adventure.

Veteran *Who* novelist John Peel instead pits the Second Doctor against Markan the Tinkerer, a scientist imprisoned by his own people in a fiercely defended orbital platform with only a robot for company. Markan, we discover, possesses the power to create persuasive psychic illusions, and the obligatory itch for vengeance...

David Troughton narrates and, as you'd expect, makes a decent stab at capturing his dad's cadences, by turns mischievous, flustered and furious. He clearly relishes the smooth, plummy villainy of Markan, but while his Zoe is perfectly serviceable it's a pity Jamie's laid low with flu for most of the proceedings, depriving us of some much-loved character dynamics.

Fans of modern *Who* might find the plotting all too linear, the storytelling just a tad straightforward. But from featureless corridors to the Doctor's exasperated cries of "Oh, my giddy aunt!", this old-school tale nails the spirit of its era, even if it sometimes feels like a vintage *Doctor Who* annual story extended beyond its natural length. **Nick Setchfield**

AUGUST 1980

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



'30s Flash
Buster Crabbe
was an early
guest star.

FLASHBACK

Buck Up Your Ideas

30 AUGUST 1980 At 6:15pm on Saturday 30 August 1980, ITV declared interplanetary war on the BBC. The aim? Dethrone *Doctor Who*. In truth it was just the latest salvo in an ongoing conflict. Over the years the splintered ITV regions had pitted everything from *Space: 1999* to *Man From Atlantis* against the Time Lord. Now the commercial channel was united behind a single networked schedule, combining its firepower in a concerted challenge to the Beeb's traditional dominance of Saturday evening telly.

The key weapon was *Buck Rogers In The 25th Century*, the flashy revival of the veteran space hero that had launched in America the year before.

The next season of *Doctor Who*, in January 1982, saw the show abandon Saturdays altogether.

Produced by *Battlestar Galactica*'s Glen A Larson, it brought post-*Star Wars* FX dazzle to the small screen as defrosted 20th-century astronaut William "Buck" Rogers explored 2491 in the company of spandex-clad Colonel Wilma Deering (Erin Gray) and chrome homunculus Twiki (voiced by Mel Blanc).

Britain had already seen Buck in action: the feature-length pilot was released in cinemas in July 1979. ITV launched its run with "Planet Of The Slave Girls", a shamelessly titled two-parter that fielded a meta guest star in Buster Crabbe, who'd played Buck in 1939's cliffhanging serial.

It was a formidably glossy Hollywood product, but *Doctor Who*

had raised its game. New producer John Nathan-Turner was determined to wrest an increasingly tatty, budget-bitten production into the '80s. Episode one of "The Leisure Hive" debuted a snazzy new starfield title sequence, a trendy neon-tubing logo, and a synth-heavy revamp of the theme tune. Whimsy was out, replaced by hard science, while cutting-edge Quantel editing technology gave the show a newfound visual elan. Even the Doctor had a makeover, with Tom Baker's jumble sale of a costume replaced by a regal burgundy wardrobe. A sturdy new TARDIS prop completed the rebrand.

But it wasn't enough. ITV was offering cosmic attack fleets, mountain fortresses and, yes, slave girls. The BBC gave us alien boardroom intrigue, zero-gravity squash and dialogue about wave equations. In its first clash with the brash American newcomer, *Doctor Who* haemorrhaged viewers. A week later it dropped out of the top 100 for the first time since 1966. Biddi biddi biddi, Doc.



Electric scenes and laser beams were all the rage.

Machine Music

23 AUGUST 1980 From Zager and Evans's doomy, millennia-spanning epic "In The Year 2525" to Electric Light Orchestra's near-future weepie "Ticket To The Moon", pop music is no stranger to radio-friendly prophecies. But none feel quite as chillingly prescient as Hazel O'Connor's "Eighth Day".

Released as the second single from her debut album *Breaking Glass*, soundtrack to the film of the same name, it tells of the rise of artificial intelligence, born in a world where humankind declares, "In our image let's make robots for our slaves. Imagine all the time that we can save." But "the silicon dream" soon sours; upset, the machine triggers a vaguely-defined cataclysm that leaves "nothing but a void, forever light", "a world at an end" where "everyone has died" and only apocalyptic chants of "Amen!" remain.

One of the defining faces of 1980, with a striking look partway between punk and New Romantic, O'Connor wrote the song just 12 hours before it was recorded. It's tempting to imagine she was seized by a sudden vision of the 21st century. In her 1981 autobiography *Uncovered Plus*, she reveals she set out to parallel the Book of Genesis, only for man to screw up the creation part: "Having unleashed elements he cannot control, the Man-made Machine Monster takes over."

Bringing dystopian science fiction to the Radio 1 Breakfast Show, "Eighth Day" eventually rose to number five. In recent years O'Connor has reflected on its predictive power. "You've only got to look at what's cooking everywhere," she said in 2021. "It's ever nearer, ever closer."

VIRGINIA TURBETT/REDFERNS/GETTY



The stars of *Xanadu* get their skates on.

UNIVERSAL/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Olivia Newton-Bomb

8 AUGUST 1980 Conceived as a cash-in on the same short-lived disco craze that spawned 1979's *Roller Boogie*, *Xanadu* stands as a legendary Hollywood misfire, derailing the movie career of Olivia Newton-John and directly inspiring the creation of the Golden Raspberry Awards.

An all-singing, all-rollerskating fantasia, it cast the *Grease* goddess as a genuine mythological figure: Terpsichore, one of the nine muses of Olympus, reincarnated in modern-day LA. The premise is recycled

from 1947's Rita Hayworth showcase *Down To Earth* – itself a sequel to 1941 fantasy *Here Comes Mr Jordan* – while Gene Kelly, bizarrely enough, reprises his character from 1944's *Cover Girl*.

Critics skewered it, but *Xanadu*'s songs escaped the wormhole of box-office disaster. Newton-John's "Magic" was a US number one, while the enduring banger of a title song, a collaboration with ELO, topped the UK Top 40. The dream that came through a million years lived on through all the tears...



IN REAL LIFE

- ▶ **Prime Minister:** Margaret Thatcher
- ▶ **US President:** Jimmy Carter
- ▶ **In the charts:** ABBA's "The Winner Takes It All" is number one before David Bowie resurfaces Major Tom in "Ashes To Ashes".
- ▶ **In the news:** Lech Wałęsa leads strikes at the Gdańsk Shipyard; the Moscow Olympics comes to a close; baby Azaria Chamberlain disappears from a campsite at Uluru, Australia; in Iceland, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir is the world's first democratically elected female president.

ON THE SHELF



▶ *Doctor Who Weekly* regenerated into a monthly with issue 44. Thirty pence bought you part six of the Fourth Doctor comic strip "Dragon's Claw".

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FANTASTIC FOUR

It's brain-clobberin' time! How well do you know Marvel's founding family?

Quizmaster Nick Setchfield, Editor At Large

QUESTION 1

In the Fantastic Four's origin story, what space phenomenon transforms their bodies?

QUESTION 2

The group's early adventures take place in a different city from New York. Name it.

QUESTION 3

Issue four of *Fantastic Four* reintroduced which Golden Age superhero?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Name this artist, who had a classic '80s run on the title.

QUESTION 5

Doctor Doom is monarch of which fictional European country in the Marvel Universe?

QUESTION 6

Due to rights issues, which member of the group was missing from the 1978 cartoon series?

QUESTION 7

Who is the superpowered son of Reed and Sue Richards?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

This supervillain has challenged the Fantastic Four many times. Who is he?

QUESTION 9

What was the Fantastic Four's new HQ after the Baxter Building was destroyed in the '80s?

QUESTION 10

Long-time nuisance the Impossible Man hails from which planet?



QUESTION 11

Which legendary B-movie king produced 1994's never-released *Fantastic Four* film?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Who's the actor playing this big-screen incarnation of the Silver Surfer?

QUESTION 13

Ben's endlessly referenced relative finally appeared in 1982. Name her.

QUESTION 14

Which Marvel hero made it the Fantastic Five in issue one of *What If?*

QUESTION 15

The Thing's girlfriend Alicia is the stepdaughter of which Fantastic Four nemesis?



QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Name this character, who briefly replaced Sue Storm in the group.

QUESTION 17

Issue 50 of *Fantastic Four* (from 1966) concluded which landmark story arc?

QUESTION 18

Who directed 2005's *Fantastic Four* and 2007's *Fantastic Four: Rise Of The Silver Surfer*?

QUESTION 19

Which superstar Image Comics artist gave the team a '90s revamp in *Heroes Reborn*?

QUESTION 20

The Baxter Building houses a portal to which perilous antimatter universe?

1 Cosmic rays 2 Central City
3 Namor the Sub-Mariner 4 Annihilus
4 John Byrne 5 Latveria 6 The
Human Torch 7 Franklin 8 Annihilus
9 Lou Ferrigno 10 Poppy
Rogers 11 Doug Jones
12 Doctor Comman 13 Doug Jones
14 Spider-Man
15 The Puppet Master 16 Crystal
Aut Petrunia 17 Tim Story
18 Jim Lee 19 The Negative Zone
20 The Goblets Trilogy 18 Tim Story
17 Jim Lee 20 The Negative Zone

Answers

How did you do?

Rank yourself by FF foe

0-5
Paste-Pot Pete

6-10
Mole Man

11-15
The Wizard

16-19
Doctor Doom

20
Galactus

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"Looks like [REDACTED] will be getting a bulging Jiffy bag"

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your
favourite
scary
movie?**

**Plus!
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Apocalyptic Design**

Joe Keery

**Tamara
(If she's home)**

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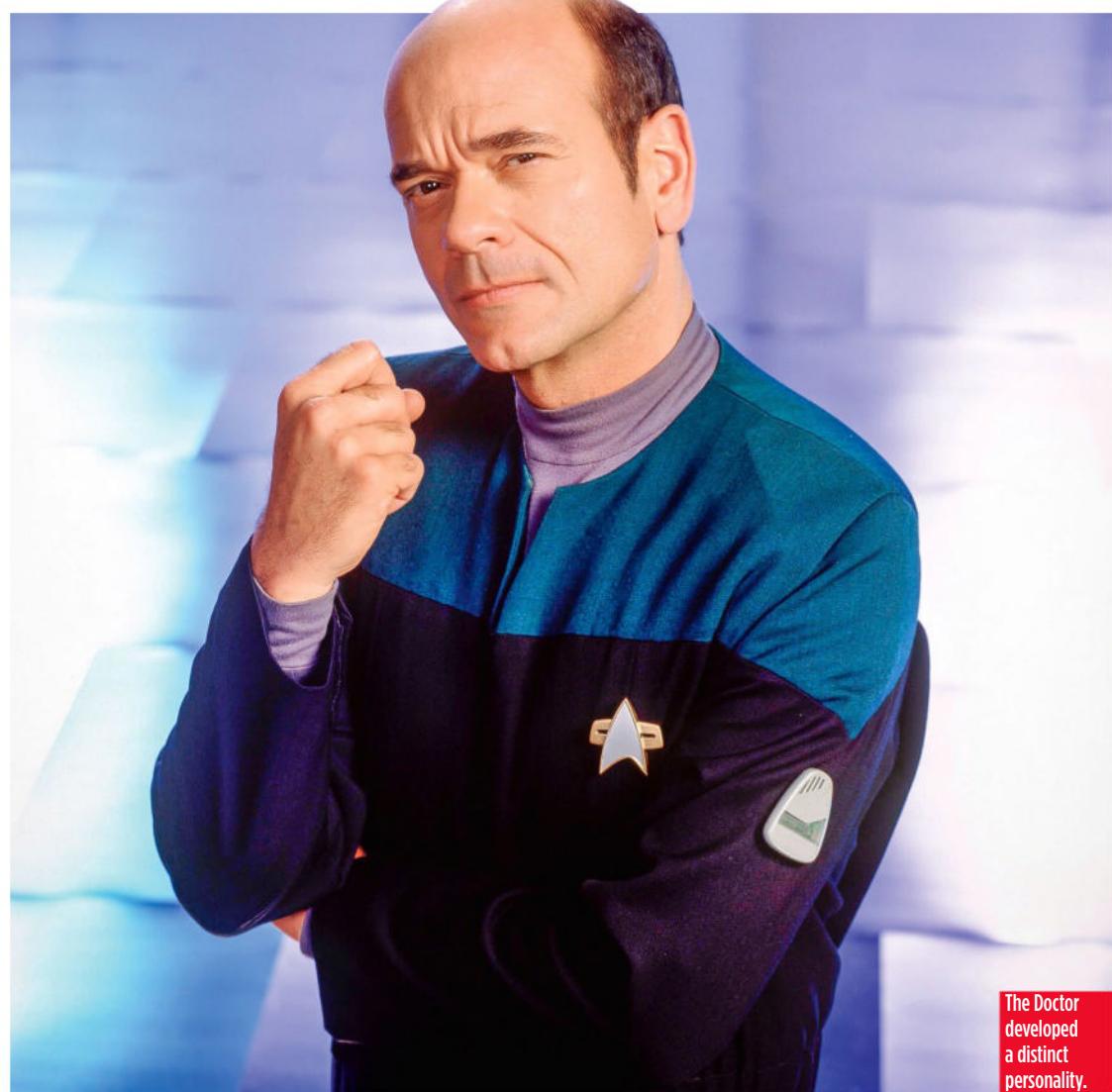
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Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



The Doctor developed a distinct personality.

The EMH

Dave Bradley, Freelance writer



During its run, *Voyager* may not have had the cultural impact of *The Original Series* or *The Next Generation*, but it introduced some breakout characters, such as statuesque Borg alumna Seven of Nine, who returned to the public consciousness recently thanks to her turn in *Picard*. Another fan

favourite is the Emergency Medical Hologram, played by Robert Picardo. The Doctor was introduced in the first episode, popping into existence with a perfunctory, "Please state the nature of the medical emergency".

The Doctor is an AI, taking physical form thanks to hard-light emitters (it's all done with photons and force fields, okay?), intended to be a temporary assistant when a crew needs

extra aid. Unfortunately, since *Voyager* is light years from Earth and many essential crew members are dead, the EMH has to permanently take charge of sickbay.

His irascible nature – not robotic detachment, but businesslike pragmatism – is established in the opening episode "Caretaker". He immediately demands status updates, barely acknowledges that the human doctor is gone, and scolds Ensign Kim for handing him the wrong sort of tricorder.

Although he never develops the perfect bedside manner, over seven seasons a more nuanced version of the Doctor emerges, one capable of guilt, affection and loyalty. He explores the boundaries of his programming, learning to paint, write and appreciate opera. In season three, he's no longer confined to sickbay after discovering a mobile emitter, and gains the ability to activate and deactivate himself.

I'm drawn to The Doctor because, like Spock and Data before him, he continues *Star Trek*'s grand tradition of exploring what it means to be human. Free will, the rights of artificial minds and what it means to "live" are all core *Star Trek* themes, and The Doctor exemplifies them. Picardo himself told *startrek.com*, in a 2022 interview, that he

originally thought Vulcan crew member Tuvok was going to inherit the position of Pinocchio-like outsider – but when it became clear The Doctor was going on that journey, he realised, "I may have the best role in the show".

A cameo in *Star Trek: First Contact* followed; then Picardo was invited to take a recurring role in the animated TV series *Prodigy*, which reunited several *Voyager* stars. On 15 January The Doctor will return in the latest *Star Trek* series, *Starfleet Academy*, set in *Discovery*'s 32nd-century timeline. I can't wait. ●

ChatGPT is sick of Dave telling it the nature of his medical emergencies.

Fact Attack!

→ In the *Voyager* series bible, The Doctor is called the "Experimental Medical Program", and also referred to as "Zimmerman".

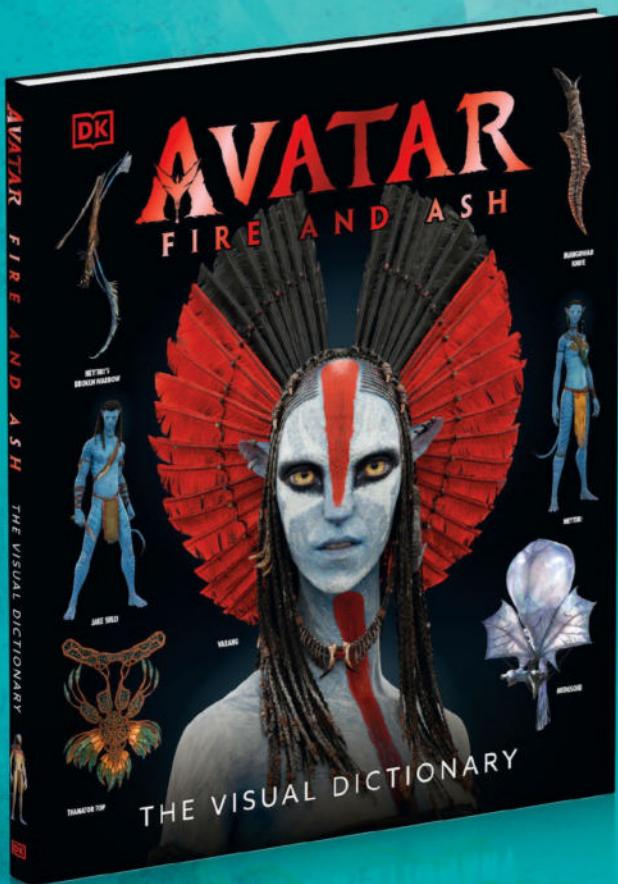
→ With one exception (tenor Agostino Castagnola in season six's "Virtuoso"), Picardo performed all of The Doctor's opera himself.

→ Other EMHs have appeared on screen, played by Andy Dick in *Voyager*, Santiago Cabrera in *Picard* and Brendan Beiser in *Discovery*.

→ Picardo voiced robo-taxi Johnny Cab in 1990's *Total Recall*. His head was sculpted for 1985's *Explorers*, and it was reused for the puppet.

→ Picardo serves on the board of The Planetary Society, a non-profit that advocates for public astronomy and space exploration projects.

FOLLOW THE PATH BACK TO PANDORA



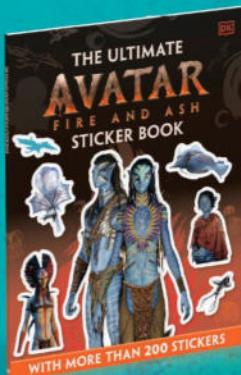
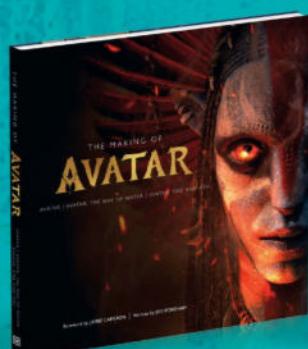
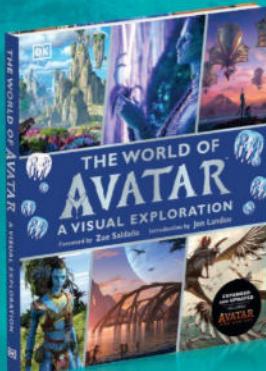
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