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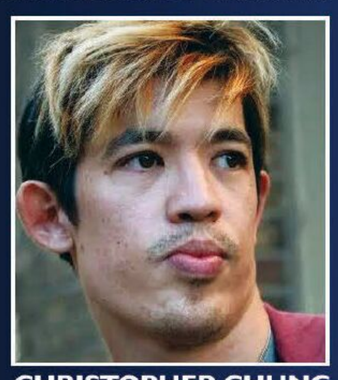
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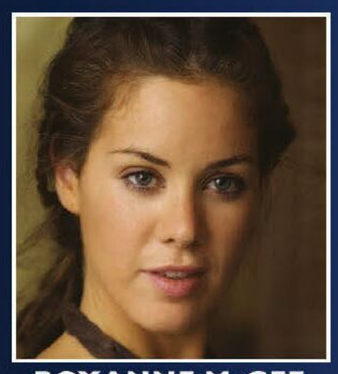
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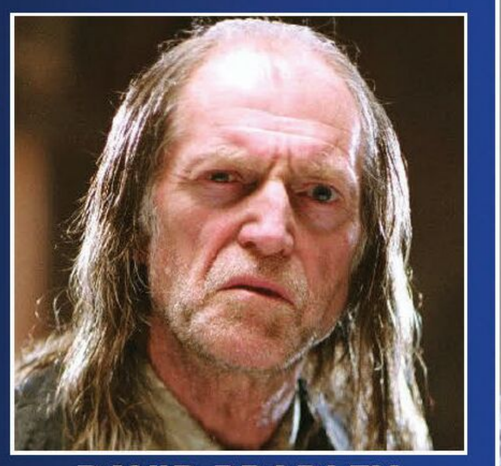
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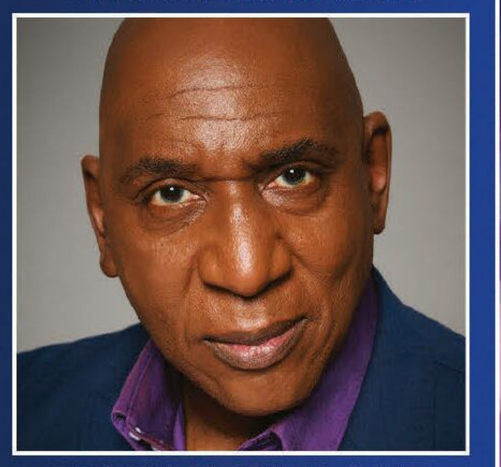
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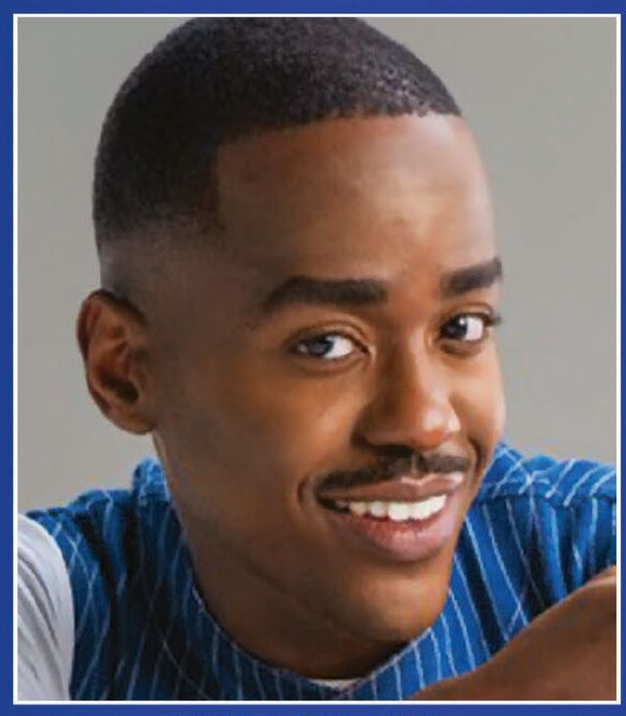
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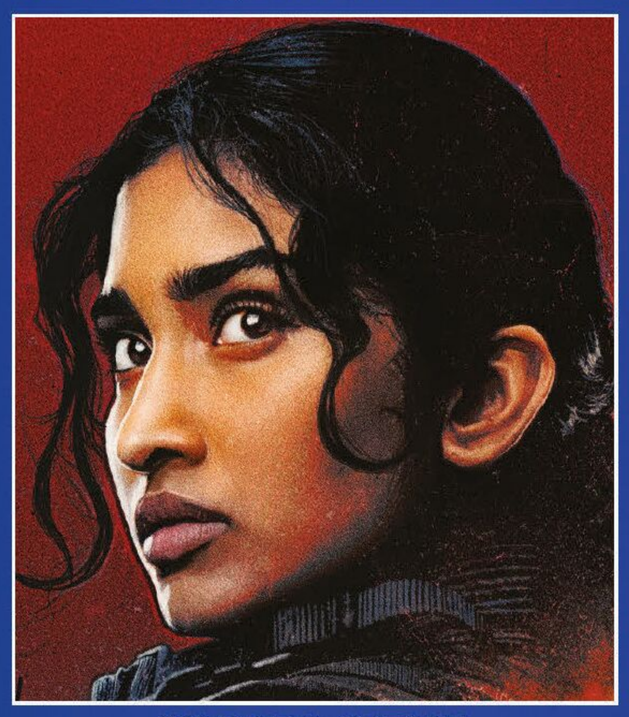
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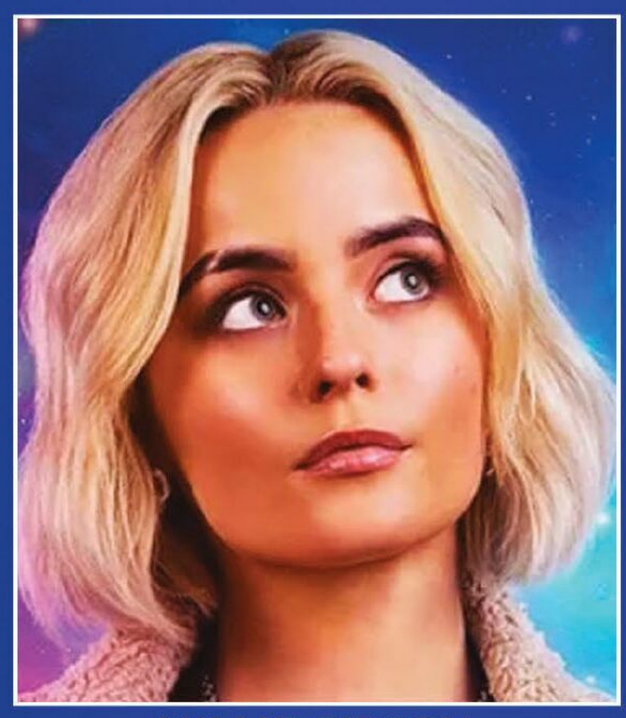
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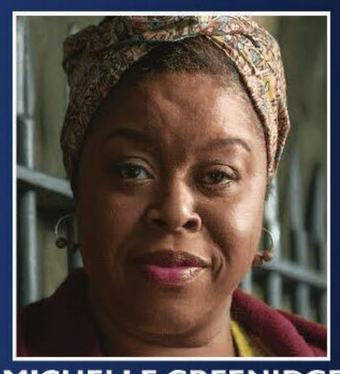
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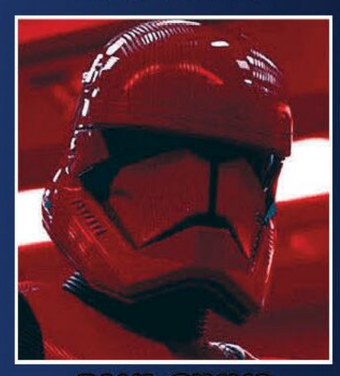
PAUL KASEY
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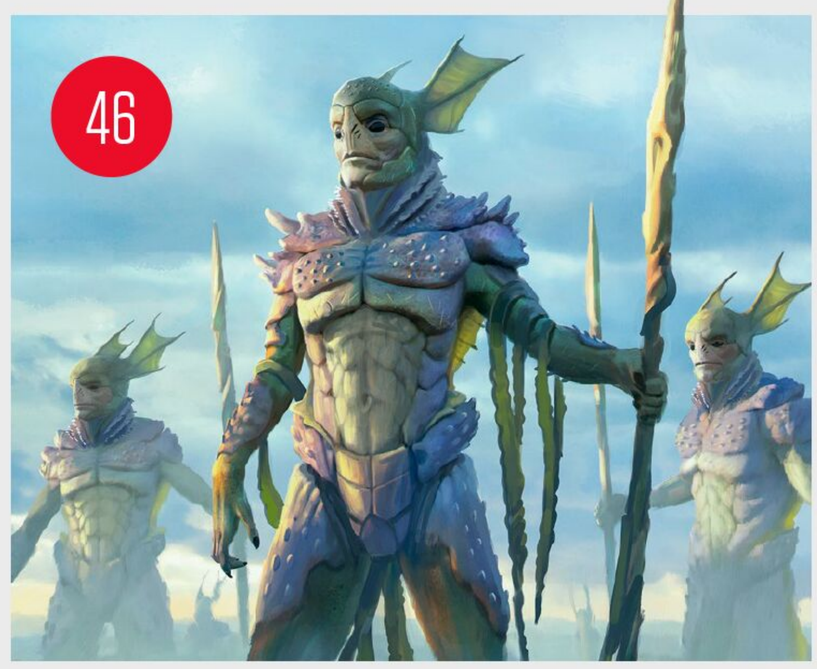
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A positive ID on *Nowhere Man*.



LIONSGATE

Captain's Log



Apologies to anyone hoping or expecting to see a certain horror franchise in this issue – there was "no time" to be able to include it. A common problem for films that take around a year to hit screens, it seems. But we're sure there'll be a fancy event held for "content creators" (no, still not sure what it is that we're creating either...) that you probably won't see because it's missing a target demographic but *what do we know*, eh?

But while we may not have Ghost*face*, we do have *Ghostwatch*, as the pseudo-documentary makes a surprise return to Blu-ray in a fancy new edition that no-one could have expected! Now where else are you going to read the story behind that?

Elsewhere we've got the long-awaited return of the Titans – no, not the Teen ones, they're much older than that – in *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters* season two, and Djo versus a parasitic fungus in *Cold Storage*. And speaking of Joe Keery, there's yet more *Stranger Things* as we dig into the design of the final season. But that's not the only design goodness – Ian's done a deep dive to uncover the version of *The War Between The Land And Sea* you've never seen... until now!

Deep breath, and plunge into the pages ahead – we'll see you again in four weeks.

Darren
X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind



DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ I'm trying to catch up on a backlog of comics and shows – a quick reminder how great the *Walking Dead* spinoffs are, and the graphic novels collecting the original *Aliens* comics.

→ I've been listening to Bill Conti's 1987 score for *Masters Of The Universe* a lot recently – I still know every beat.

RANT

→ ... I'm hearing Bill Conti's 1987 score for *Masters Of The Universe* in my sleep.



IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Somehow I only watched the odd episode of *Inside No 9*, so I'm fixing it by watching one on iPlayer every lunchtime.

→ Delighted to learn that Paul Giamatti is a *Star Trek* fan, who recently rewatched *DS9*.

→ Would happily watch a series of Kate Lethbridge-Stewart threatening to shoot people who play their music on buses, ride e-scooters on the pavement etc.

RIP

→ Sad to hear about the death of actor Gregory de Polnay, who was so brilliant as D84 in classic Tom Baker *Doctor Who* "The Robots Of Death".



JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RANT

→ Enjoyed Christopher Biggins talking about *Rentaghost*, but why was there only a single episode of the show to accompany it? Wish The Beeb would do more event telly around its extensive genre archive, as it does so brilliantly with vintage music programming.



NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ Not so seasonal now, but the *Archive On 4* "A Ghost Story For Christmas" makes for fascinating listening whatever the time of year. Find it on BBC Sounds.

→ Thoroughly enjoyed *The Avengers In The Veracity Trap!* by Chip Kidd and Michael Cho, a gorgeously retro graphic novel that plays witty storytelling games.



TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Genndy's Tartakovsky's *Primal* returns crazier than ever. The weirdest zombie story out there; violent but emotionally-driven. It's the definition of adult animation. Give it a try.

→ Speaking of alt zombies, seek out *We Bury The Dead* for its really interesting take on the dead who wake up and Daisy Ridley's introspective performance.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

FEBRUARY 2026

→ NEWS /// INTERVIEWS /// INSIGHT /// GUNGANS!



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Mask Fun

Time's up for Maya in **The Strangers – Chapter 3.** But where's Tamara?!

Highlights



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GOOD LUCK, HAVE FUN, DON'T DIE

→ A visitor from the future returns to tackle a rogue AI.



10

WHISTLE

→ If you happen across an Aztec death whistle, it's probably best to not put it in your mouth.



18

SEND HELP

→ Sam Raimi's survival horror-thriller pits a put-upon worker against her boss.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

The Ravages Of Intelligence

Gore Verbinski on how Sam Rockwell is the salve for AI corruption in **Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**



Diner patrons are enlisted to save the world.

WE'VE BARELY BEGUN 2026, but there's no question that the controversies around generative AI will remain a hot-button topic around the globe. For creatives, generative AI most definitely represents a massive threat to livelihoods. But what if it's even worse than we could imagine?

Director Gore Verbinski (*Pirates Of The Caribbean*) and screenwriter Matthew Robinson (*Love And Monsters*) are more than happy to amplify the AI boogeymen in our heads with *Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die*, their darkly comedic exploration of the tech's worst-case scenarios.

Unfolding like a modern-day *Time Bandits* meets *Black Mirror*, Sam Rockwell (*Galaxy Quest*) plays a rumpled Man from the Future whose mission is to travel to the past to save the world. He's convinced that his heroes are among the patrons of a Norms diner in Los Angeles, who include teachers Mark (Michael Peña) and Janet (Zazie Beetz), the very sad Susan (Juno Temple) and birthday party princess actor Ingrid (Haley Lu Richardson).

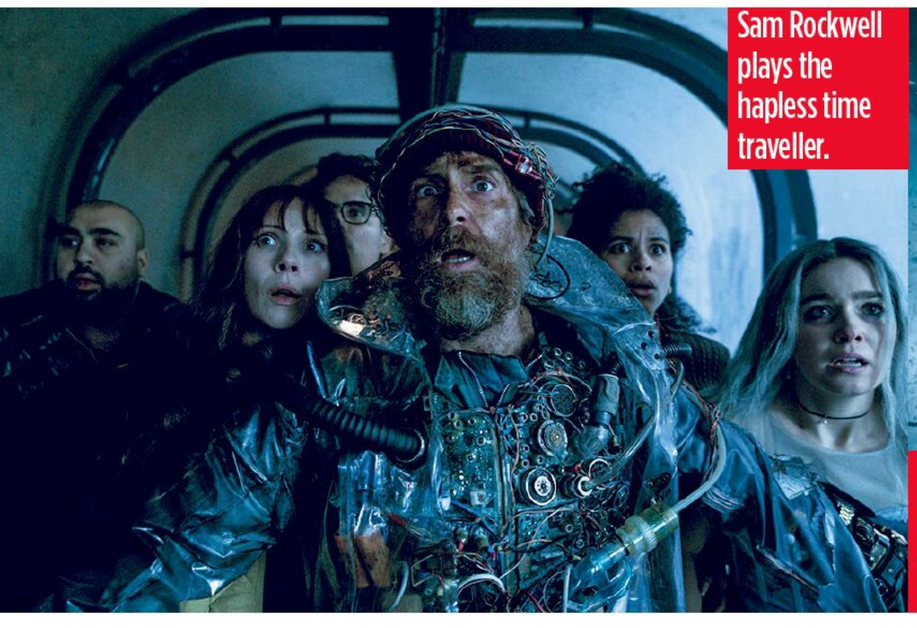
"Look, the future is so fucked up that it didn't send us Arnold Schwarzenegger; it sent us Sam Rockwell," Verbinski cracks to Red Alert. "You want a hero? Sorry, the heroes are all dead and this is who you got. And he's asking them the same thing we're asking the audience, which is, 'Do you believe in this guy who looks like he crawled out of a dumpster, and are you ready to go on the journey with him?'"

What ensues is a crazy dark night of the soul as Rockwell's character leads his rag tag group through mind-boggling threats in the city, interspersed with flashback vignettes of their lives that are darkly entwined with near-future tech.

"I'm a big fan of this sort of picaresque narrative of the rogue and the misfits," Verbinski says of the film's structure which weaves the characters' emotional, individual stories into the overarching mission. "We did a lot of work to get in front of what can happen in a movie when you say, 'Here's the mission, but wait....' So you feel like the backstories of the various characters are connected to the main story and are re-informing it when you come back into the main story. You're like, 'Oh, *that's* why Susan knew that thing about Norms', so you want to make sure that they're dialled in a way that keeps the flow heading towards the climax."

The ride to that climax is one that even the most hallucinating AI prompt bots couldn't possibly conjure. From CG creatures to

> **"It's starting to drink its own piss, its source pool contaminated"**



Sam Rockwell plays the hapless time traveller.



There are traces of *Time Bandits* clearly on show.

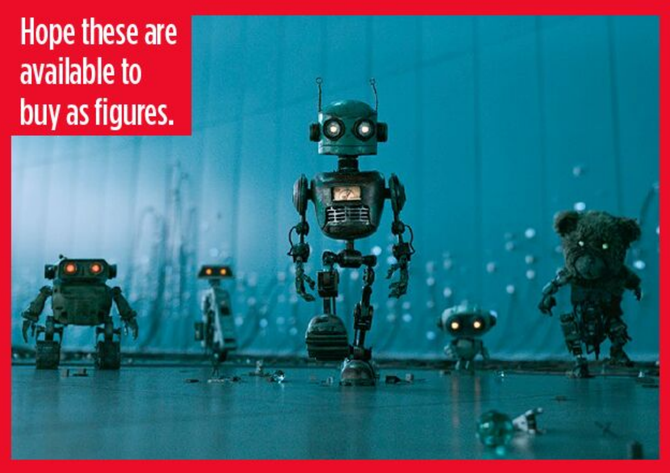


In this film, the future probably isn't a nice place.





Juno Temple stars as party actor Susan.



Hope these are available to buy as figures.



Verbinski says this isn't "anti-AI".

mobs of phone-addicted teens, the creative and plausible "What if?"s are brought to life for audiences to both laugh at and soberly process. Looking at the repercussions of all this embedded tech from within the safety of his film is exactly what Verbinski wants audiences to do, and then really think about after the film fades to black.

"I am in these meetings with executives from all sorts of tech companies and with artists, where everybody's arguing about copyright, and it's fascinating," Verbinski says of his own experiences with encroaching AI. "But I like the grey of it. If you asked me 100 questions about AI, I'd give you 100 contradictions. I think that's where the fascinating stuff is happening, even though I do think that there is a palpable sense of something being taken from us."

It's also why the film's tone is firmly tongue-in-cheek with its absurdities, because Verbinski believes, "humour is the harshest critic, if you nail it. When people laugh, the little door in their forehead opens a crack and you get to sneak in there. The medicine is in the cake. So I don't see the film as boldly anti-AI."



A nine-year-old boy is building a super-AI.

However, Verbinski says he thinks his film is just as much a cautionary tale for the tech creators pushing out their software and technology faster than anyone can process. "It's starting to drink its own piss," he says of AI's shortcomings. "It's created so much content from the internet and is spitting it back so fast that its source pool has become contaminated. Ultimately, what we're going to have to do is feed it to itself.

"But the tsunami is coming and we're going to have to drop in and surf," Verbinski says regarding how his film might help all those trying to process how we control our uncertain near-futures. "I think the mantra of the film is its title – *Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die*. Much like 2026 Happy New Year: 'Good luck, have fun, don't die.' I mean, there's something oddly therapeutic about that, if that makes sense. It's kind of got that sweet and sour to it." ●

Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die is in US cinemas from 13 February and UK cinemas from 20 February.

SCI-FACT! **Sam Rockwell's costume was built using bits and pieces from Apex Electronics, a hardware store on San Fernando Boulevard.**

SCI-FACT! **Dynamite Entertainment and Archie Comics first crossed over with 2019's 12-parter *Red Sonja & Vampirella Meet Betty & Veronica*.**



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Archie and his gang team up with Ash Williams.



Artist Craig Cermak's zombified variant cover.

Unhappy Days

Evil Dead invade Riverdale in **Archie X Army Of Darkness**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

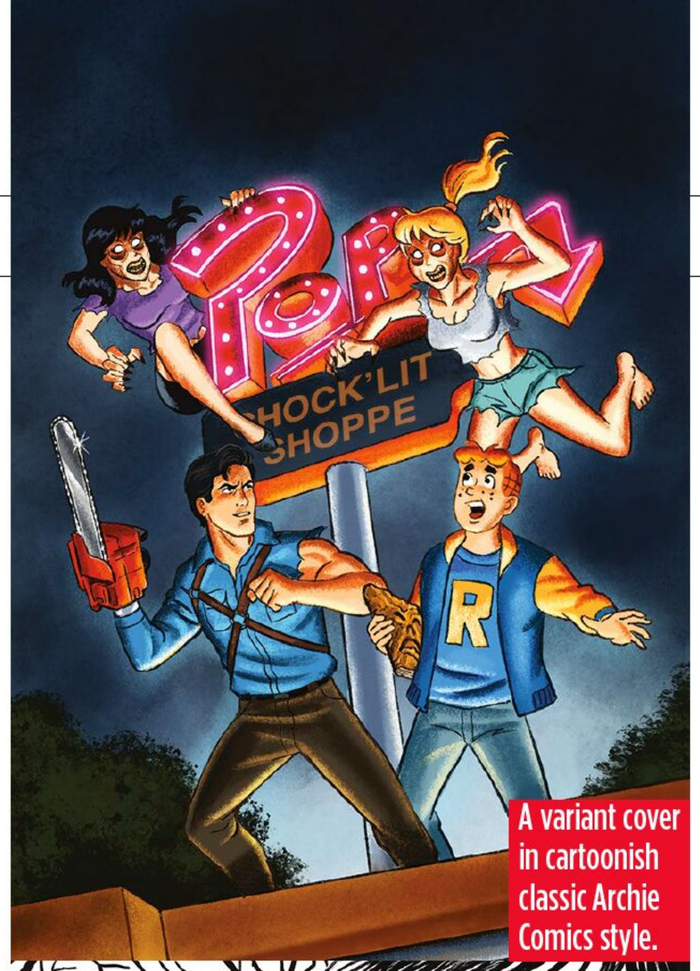
IN PART OF A MULTI-TITLE DEAL between Dynamite Entertainment and Archie Comics, the idyllic American town of Riverdale is invaded by hordes of the Evil Dead in the latest crossover between the two publishers. "This is my first time getting to write Archie and the Riverdale gang, who have been on my bucket list," says writer Erik Burnham. "And getting to mix them with Ash is just the icing on the cake."

As Archie Comics senior director of editorial Jamie L Rotante says, "Thankfully, Archie and his friends are no strangers to the undead" after the success of the Archie Horror line, in particular the miniseries *Afterlife With Archie* – currently being developed as a television series by Disney. So perhaps young Archie Andrews should have known better when he stumbles across a copy of the Necronomicon Ex-Mortis, reading a fateful section of it aloud and summoning not only Ash Williams himself, but the hordes of the Army of Darkness.

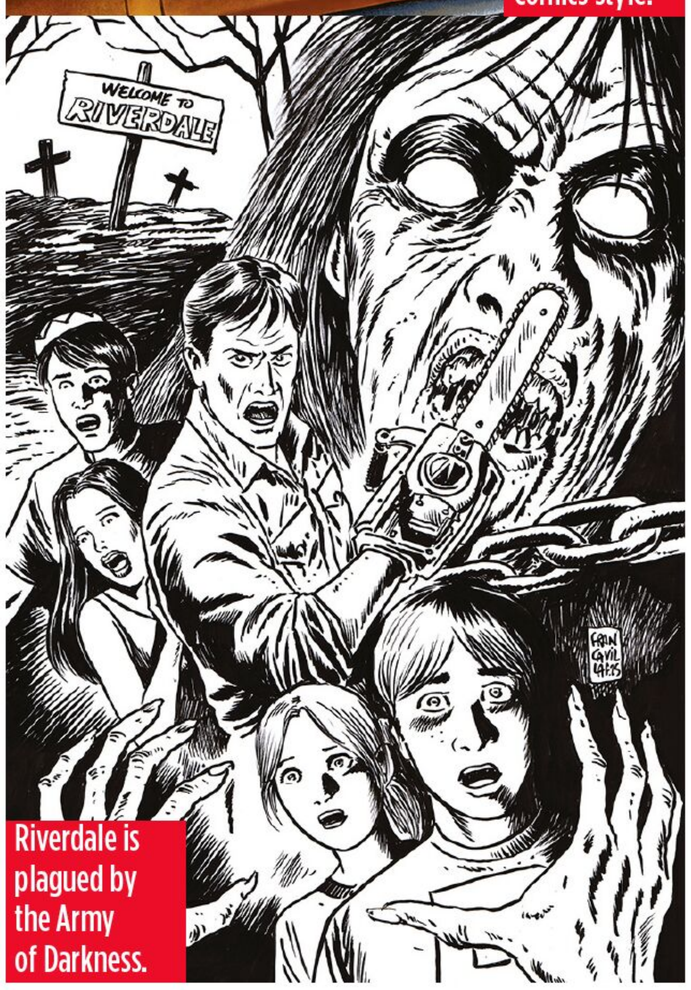
"Archie finds himself in need of a job, and a new S-Mart just happened to open in Riverdale. That's how he meets Ash, who, of course, brings his curse to continually face and fight the Army of Darkness along with him, which brings some dire consequences, for sure!" explains Burnham, revealing that "you'll see a few other folk from Riverdale," including Jughead, Betty and Veronica. "And Evil Ash is going to be there too," he adds – referring to the chainsaw-fisted hero's demonic doppelgänger.

Describing Ash as "a character that slots in so easily to comedy that he fits perfectly into this environment," Burnham has enjoyed comparing Ash and Archie's very differing but sometimes very similar personalities. "Slapstick and over-the-top humour fit as perfectly with Ash as they do with Archie," he says. "The world of Archie is like the quintessential





A variant cover in cartoonish classic Archie Comics style.



Riverdale is plagued by the Army of Darkness.

teenaged world, so these characters work perfectly in any genre that's traditionally teen-heavy. By that I mean they can work in any genre, but rom-com/comedy and horror are especially fruitful grounds for them. And what's interesting to me is crossing the tones – Ash is snarky, while Archie is more earnest, and I really like playing with that contrast."

Having worked for Archie Comics for over two decades, artist Bill Galvan is really extending himself, proving equally adept at illustrating the four-parter's gorier, bloodier moments as he is at Riverdale's trademark cartoony surrounds. "Bill knows his business," says Burnham. "The stuff I've seen already assures me we're in good hands, and I love Bill's Archie-fied take on Ash in particular. He's going to bring a classy sheen to the chaos, and he's been really enthusiastic. I can't wait to get to some of the bigger set-pieces. I'm so excited! His classic style is exactly what I was hoping for on this book." ●

Archie X Army Of Darkness is out on 4 February.

AUTHOR EXCLUSIVE

Worldwide Web

Supercomputer Max goes beyond **The Thirteenth Floor** in a new short story anthology

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

CENTRING ON SENTIENT computer Max, who wreaks murderous vengeance against anyone who threatens his residents, "The Thirteenth Floor" was ahead of its time when it debuted in the pages of short-lived weekly comic *Scream!* in 1984. Now, Max is going global in a new prose anthology from Rebellion, which features short stories from authors such as AK Benedict, Una McCormack and Martyn Waites.

"Max was always AI really in the same way that Hal 9000 – not coincidentally – was a computer personality that's grown beyond their circuits," says editor Guy Adams, referring to *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s equally independent-minded artificial intelligence. "We just have a different emotional response to that term now, as it used to be a narrative trope that our heroes had to slog through a dramatic nightmare stage to get to before finally defeating the AI by turning its logic upon itself. Now we realise that to truly make an AI lose its mind and all of its intelligence, we should feed it to the internet and then wait apathetically as it slowly destroys us."

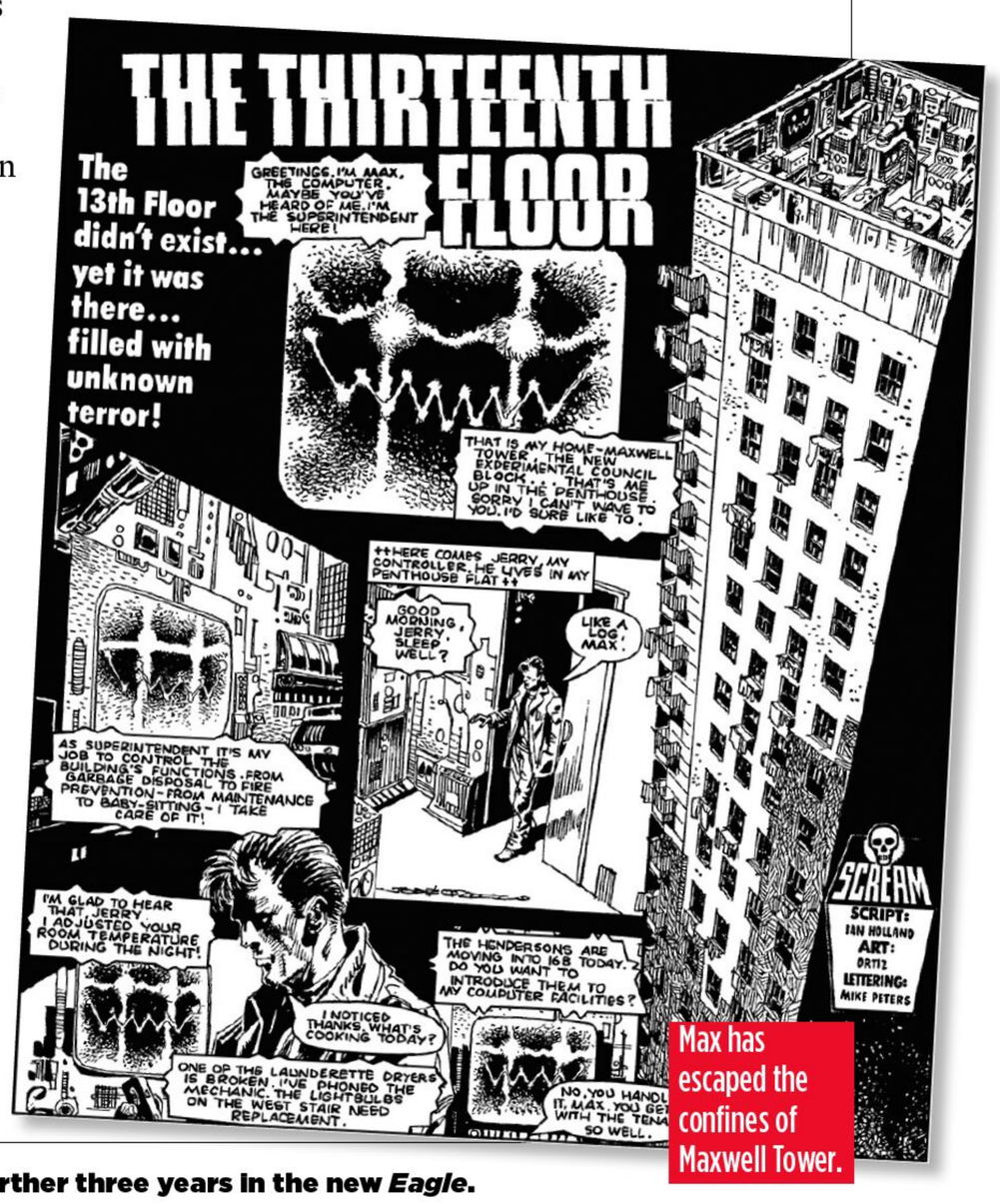
Adams' framing story "sets up the concept and then turns off the lights after everyone else has left". Max is unleashed upon the unsuspecting world in the remainder of the tales, which cover a range of geographic locations, from a sci-fi convention in Thana Niveau's "Superheroes" to a Bangalore apartment complex in Lavanya Lakshminarayan's "Soundscape For Lights Fantastic" – a setting that also features in Angela Slatter's "Funhouse".

"He makes himself at home in the AI age for sure, and I definitely think that there's space for an interesting story where Max – who is basically on the cusp of Gen X and Millennial – ends up in conflict with Gen Z AI," explains Slatter. "He causes havoc in Australia when he's installed in a new block of flats designed to reinvigorate an ex-games arcade and funhouse. But no one's investing in it, so the whole place is deserted until Jessie gets a job as an on-site caretaker."

"In a way, the original idea of Max was very prescient, with AI now, over 40 years on, becoming more prevalent and humankind outsourcing a lot of its autonomy and labour to semi-intelligent machines," continues James Lovegrove, whose story "Lobsters" takes place on board a high-end cruise liner sailing around Iceland. "Max is like a funnier and even more sinister version of HAL 9000 with his own twisted sense of justice, so what's not to love about that? He insinuates himself into the operating system of the ship, whose passengers include some fossil fuel tycoons who, needless to say, get their well-deserved comeuppance."

"My story is set in Eastern Turkey," adds James Goss, author of "The Death Trap", "and is inspired by the 2023 earthquakes, where it was discovered that many of the supposedly earthquake-proof buildings not only weren't earthquake-proof, but had been built without cement. In the aftermath, authorities, architects and builders blamed each other while people desperately dug through the rubble for their relatives. Into this comes Max, the sentient guardian of a building that somehow survived..." ●

The Thirteenth Floor Anthology is out on 12 February.



Max has escaped the confines of Maxwell Tower.

SCI-FACT! **After *Scream!* lasted only 15 issues, "The Thirteenth Floor" ran for a further three years in the new *Eagle*.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Deadly Blow

Corin Hardy's **Whistle** offers a cautionary lesson in blowing unfamiliar objects

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

The Nun's Corin Hardy is back with *Whistle*.

RED ALERT IS SAT WITH director Corin Hardy (*The Nun*). He's showing us the Grim Reaper-summoning death device at the centre of his new horror, *Whistle*, which centres on an ancient Aztec death whistle.

"When I read the script, I knew the design had to hold up," he tells us, turning the ornately decorated prop until a grotesquely carved skull comes into view. "It had to almost embody the spirit of oncoming death – it's this ancient object that feels like it holds the souls of everyone who's come before it. The scream it emits is made up of hundreds, thousands of people who've perished."

From the outset, Hardy wanted the artefact to "feel real, ancient, lived-in and worn," while also being "detailed and textured; strange and terrifying". He was keen for it to convey different expressions and moods. "Under certain lighting it would feel mysterious; at other times, more in control. It would look malign, or almost vacant."

The whistle emerged from an extensive design process, during which Hardy and concept artist Daniel Carrasco explored around 40 different iterations. "We boiled it down to what you see," Hardy says. "I wanted it to feel very tactile – something really quite beautiful that the actors could examine and engage with. It was like a sacred object."

Unsurprisingly, the whistle became a source of trepidation for cast and crew as early as pre-production. "I had versions of it in my office that you could actually blow – they made this incredibly jarring, shocking sound. I would joke and say, 'Do you want to hear how the whistle sounds?' They'd read the script, and no one wanted to hear it!"

They may well have had reason to be cautious. "The stories and beliefs around death whistles are quite varied and very mysterious," Hardy notes. "Some propose they were used in sacrifice and rituals; they've been found in the hands of beheaded skeletons. Others suggest that they might have been blown as a battle cry – if you had a number of them going into war, they'd create a formidable sound. Owen [Egerton, writer] took a lot of these ideas and put his own spin on them."



This "Aztec death whistle" lives up to its name.

Whistle follows a group of high-school teens – including Chrys (Dafne Keen) and Ellie (Sophie Nélisse) – and their teacher Mr Craven (Nick Frost), who unwittingly unleash an ancient curse and must work out how to stop it, or die in some distinctly horrific ways.

"What really chilled me was the idea that we're born, and our death is out there waiting for us – and it might come, unfortunately, in a week's time, or it might come in 90 years' time," says Hardy. "Our death knows what it looks like. And when you hear the blow of the whistle, it calls on your future death to hunt you down."

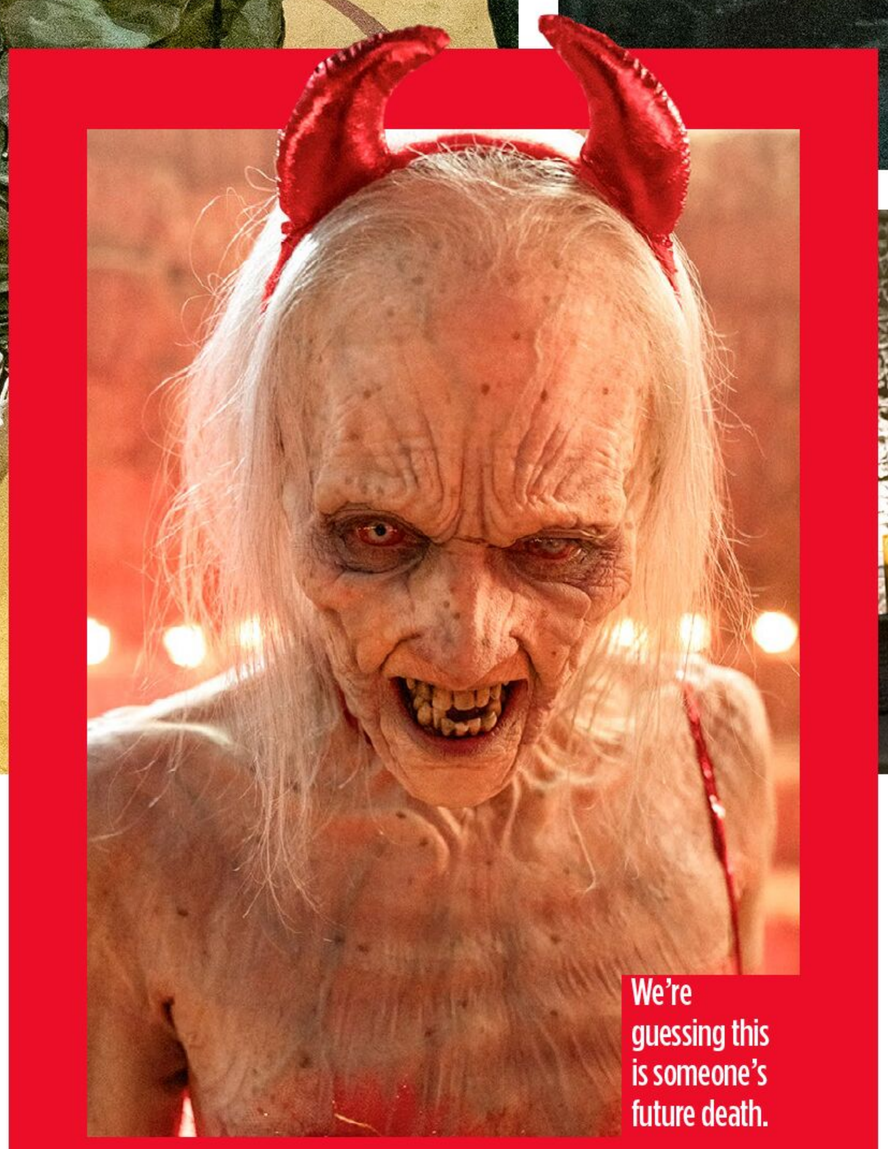
If a character's destined end is a house fire, they may be pursued by their own burning





Red Alert

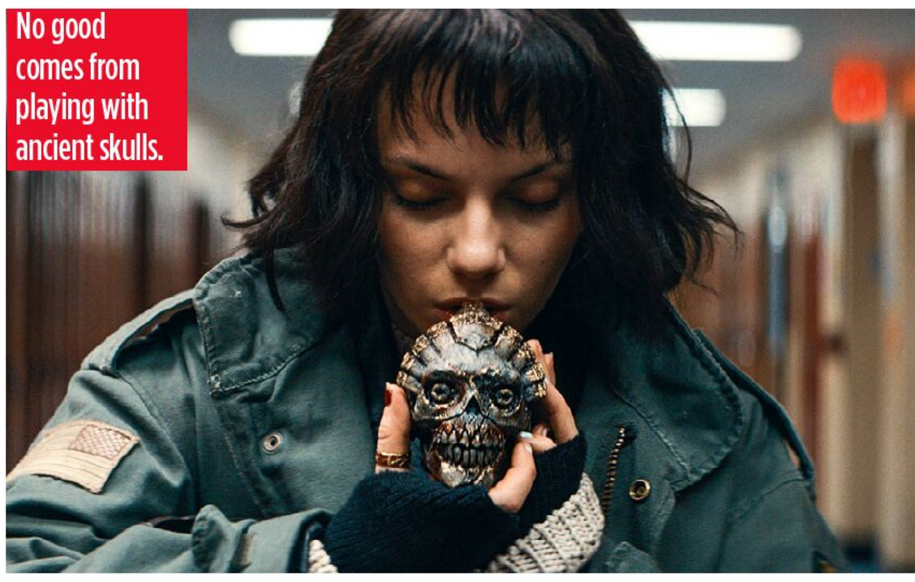
Dafne Keen stars as the unfortunate Chrys.



We're guessing this is someone's future death.



"... Then hold your arm slightly bent just like this."



No good comes from playing with ancient skulls.

future self and reduced to cinders, despite the absence of flames in the present. The premise gave Hardy scope to stage a series of what he describes as "elaborate, visual and visceral" death set-pieces, each built to stand apart, with a distinct look and its own mix of techniques, spanning practical effects, puppetry, prosthetics and CGI.

"There's one death that I'd never seen this [done] before," he enthuses. "This guy in his bedroom and what happens to him. I read it on the page, and I had to reread it. I was like,

"When you hear the whistle, it calls on your future death"

'Wow, that's insane. I have no idea how to do that yet, but I'm gonna design it.' So I worked with a couple of great storyboard artists, concept artists and special effects maestros, who all did incredible work."

Hardy's enthusiasm for the darker side of filmmaking stretches back to his childhood. "I wanted to make monsters and special effects – to bring them to life," he says. "For me, that's such a core part of making a horror movie: trying to suspend the audience's disbelief and take them on a roller-coaster ride."

His inspirations for *Whistle* range from *The Lost Boys* and *A Nightmare On Elm Street* to *Fright Night*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *The Ring*. "There's lots of little Easter eggs to other horror movies," the director teases.

Alongside the carnage, a budding romance between Chrys and Ellie provides a lighter emotional contrast. "They have to work together to figure out how they can beat the death whistle, and this brings them closer together. I'm a big softy in that sense. It was important that there was this undercurrent of hope running through and a need to survive."

Above all, Hardy says he set out to make a "horror film with heart... I wanted it to feel colourful and moody and epic – a world you can really get lost in," he says. "I wanted it to be a ride."

Asked whether the death whistle might sound again, he notes that it has already proved itself to be remarkably resilient. "It's somehow survived for thousands of years, despite people trying to destroy it," he says. "It could easily find its way into another group's hands or continue on with some of the survivors. It would be very exciting to do more."

Whistle is in cinemas from 13 February.

SCI-FACT! **At 12, Hardy was already a monster-maker, creating effects in his bike shed and shooting Super 8 films.**

SCI-FACT! **Guggenheim previously included Jar Jar Binks in 2019's *Age Of Republic* special, his very first *Star Wars* story for Marvel.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Best Buds

Ahmed Best unites his **Star Wars** roles as Jar Jar Binks and Kelleran Beq in a new Marvel one-shot

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER RETURNING TO THE *STAR Wars* universe in 2020 to play Jedi Master Kelleran Beq, Ahmed Best is now teaming up the character with Jar Jar Binks – the incorrigible Gungan that he brought to life in George Lucas's three prequel films – in a new Marvel comic, co-scripted by Marc Guggenheim.

"I really enjoyed thinking about and writing this story," Best tells Red Alert. "I had a conversation with George during *Revenge Of The Sith* about what Jar Jar had become, and George said to me that Jar Jar had become another politician, which has always stayed with me as I wondered what he meant by that. I realised that George created these stories and characters with just enough of a breadcrumb trail to follow them into their personal journeys, and I've always wanted to explore Jar Jar's journey from lovable Gungan to politician."

Best promises "plenty of juicy prequel references, as well as nods to the galaxy writ large" in the one-shot, which is set after *Attack Of The Clones*, in which Jar Jar was manipulated by Emperor Palpatine into proposing the Emergency Powers Act. "Jar Jar finds himself on a planet that is struggling with the consequences of Palpatine's new power over the galaxy," he explains. "Kelleran Beq makes it clear to him that any decision made by a senator affects more than just him and the Senate, which forces Jar Jar to grow up fast. I've always loved the inner child that Jar Jar brought out in all of us, especially me. But there comes a time where everyone must let go of the child and take responsibility for their actions, and we see Jar Jar come to that realisation in this one-shot."



Jar Jar Binks and Kelleran Beq – the fated team-up.



Dave Wachter's variant cover art for issue one.

Describing him as "a combination of James Bond and Gandalf the Grey", Best has also enjoyed writing Kelleran Beq, especially as he is bringing his two *Star Wars* alter-egos together for the first time. "He's a great character to follow those breadcrumbs that George so skilfully left all of us *Star Wars* fans and storytellers," he says. "It was great having Kelleran connect the dots between the episodes and answer a lot of the unanswered questions that we all have as the credits roll. We definitely wrote this for both Kelleran and Jar Jar to continue following the breadcrumbs and get us answers."

While according to Guggenheim, "you'll see links to other eras, including *Andor*", Best has been thinking about the story's central premise for decades. "Jar Jar was very close to Anakin Skywalker," he teases. "I really want to see Kelleran and Jar Jar uncover Palpatine's plan to turn Anakin into Darth Vader."

Guggenheim praises Laura Braga and Kieran McKeown for their clean lines, and for infusing the story with plenty of humour, noting, "you can't have a Jar Jar story without comedy", while Best says the artists have made his childhood dream come true. "Comics are where my love of world-building came from," he recalls. "They were my escape to the multiverse of possibilities and a big reason why I do what I do."

Star Wars: Jar Jar is out on 11 February.



It's the crossover you never thought you wanted.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Gorillas In The Midst

Fantastic Four journey to the **Planet Of The Apes** in a new Marvel miniseries

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE MEMBERS OF THE Marvel Universe have clashed with both *Alien* and *Predator*, Marvel's First Family is set to travel to the Planet of the Apes in a new miniseries that takes place within the continuity of the original films, occurring between 1968's *Planet Of The Apes* and 1970's *Beneath The Planet Of The Apes*.

"I've worked closely with 20th Century Studios to make sure we aren't breaking any of the established lore while still carving out enough space to tell our own story," says writer Josh Trujillo, who believes that the Fantastic Four were obvious candidates for the four-parter.

"Once the crossover was announced, fans immediately saw the news and thought, 'Oh yeah, that makes a lot of sense!'" he continues. "It's an Earth-shattering event – no pun intended – for our Apes to encounter 'intelligent' humans, but visiting strange worlds is something the Fantastic Four do all the time. Plus, the fans who grew up with both franchises, like I did, have always dreamed of this natural crossover, so I hope we can live up to their expectations."

Trujillo refuses to reveal how exactly the Fantastic Four are transported there. "Without giving too much away, I'll say that they don't quite understand where – or when – they are at first," he teases. "It takes them a minute to figure things out, but they'd better hurry because their very survival depends upon it. I can also say that they don't come to the Planet of the Apes willingly. They are thrown into this dire situation and are immediately fighting for their lives. Meanwhile, the Apes are put in a crisis unlike anything they've ever encountered before, dealing with these new unwanted visitors and how they could impact Ape society. It's sci-fi action and big ideas alongside important conversations about the nature of humanity, with hopefully some twists along the way."

There are plenty of well-known faces from both series. "You can definitely expect to see all of your favourite – and perhaps least favourite in some cases – apes, including Cornelius, Zira, Ursus and, of course, Dr Zaius," adds Trujillo. "You'll also see a collection of Fantastic Four characters well-suited for this event, including a villain we would have been crazy not to include!"

Describing him as "a real miracle worker" Trujillo is impressed by artist Andrea Di Vito's work. "The iconic Ape make-up from the original films is fairly stiff because of the limitations in prosthetics at the time so it's a real testament to those Apes actors for being able to wring so much pathos out of a limited range of facial expressions," he says. "As a result, I was nervous that any artist could stay on-model while also conveying the emotions necessary for our story. Thankfully, Andrea blew me away from his very first sketches. He captures the mood and the style of each scene perfectly, and there are some jaw-dropping moments throughout the entire series. What's more, his Thing is gorgeous!"

Planet Of The Apes vs Fantastic Four is out on 4 February.



It's probably no surprise that Doctor Doom is involved.



Looks like Dr Zaius is about to get clobbering.

SCI-FACT! ***Planet Of The Apes*** **previously crossed over with DC's** ***Green Lantern*** **in 2017 in a Boom! Studios miniseries.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Monster Mash

Director Steve Hudson on family-friendly spin on the *Frankenstein* genre **Stitch Head** WORDS: **MATT MAYTUM**



WRITER AND director Steve Hudson makes his animation debut with the upcoming feature *Stitch Head*, an adaptation of Guy Bass's illustrated children's book series. Though Hudson first encountered the stories in a non-visual medium, listening to an audio CD on a car journey one wet afternoon.

"It was read all by one actress doing all the voices," he recalls. "We're all listening and the kids are all listening and I suddenly realised that we're all really into it." He had a 13-year-old at the time, and eight-year-old twins. "I think none of them had ever seen a *Frankenstein* movie, but we all get it. It's like, 'Oh, right, there's a little village and the castle and a laboratory and a professor. It saves so much faff because normally with an animated movie, if you're making up a world and you've got to explain the mechanics, it's just like, 'Oh god, get on with it!'"

Riffing on the ubiquitous *Frankenstein* mythos, there's no need for any of that exposition. "It just felt that it's part of our collective unconscious – everybody gets it," smiles Hudson. "Mad Professor. Angry Mob. Pitchforks. Got it. You don't need to explain. So it felt like you can have so much fun with that." Hudson enjoyed leaning into the filmic tropes established as far back as the classic '30s *Frankenstein* movies by James Whale. "It's a feast, it's a gift, to be able to play with that," he adds.

But beyond parody, Hudson also sought to invest the stories with genuine emotion, something he found in abundance in Bass's books. "You feel that Guy Bass is really invested in the emotional situation of *Stitch Head*. There's a tenderness to it and a sort of empathy and an aching, and I think kids really deserve that," he says. "Stories really mean something to children. That was certainly the aspiration."

The loveable little Stitch Head himself is something like a cross between the Monster and assistant figure Igor. He's the original sewn-together creation of the work-obsessed Professor, but now mostly spends his time helping all of the newly created monsters settle in at Castle Grotteskew. The latest is the giant but cuddly Creature, whose relationship with Stitch Head gives the film its heart, though the latter is tempted by the superficial fame



> Stories really mean something to children. That was the aspiration



There's a whole cast of crazy creature characters.



Professor's first monster forms a bond with his latest.

and connection offered by a travelling freak show.

Voicing the leads, Hudson has Asa Butterfield (*Hugo*, *Sex Education*) as the title character and Joel Fry (*Game Of Thrones*) as Creature. Of Butterfield, Hudson says, "Asa has that innocence about him, and authenticity, which I think is really, really important. He even sort of looks a little bit like Stitch Head – he has wide eyes, and he has that kind of innocence and introspection." Creature isn't the sharpest tool in the box, but Hudson says that his superpower is love, "and that kind of enthusiasm, but played really straight [by Fry], and not sort of *Dumb And Dumber*, I thought was really beautiful. You've got to go through a whole journey with these guys and you've got to feel them and identify with them."

When it came to designing the castle's various patchworked residents, who very much sit on the cute end of the monster spectrum, Hudson explains: "We wanted everything to be handmade. It feels that this is not a very mass-produced world. All the monsters are literally stitched together and all the world is kind of stitched together and handmade." He says that Austrian artist and architect Hundertwasser's idea – about the straight line being a tool of the devil – was a guiding principle. "Then we literally first played around doing that game where you draw a monster's head and then fold it over and pass it off and draw the body."

But for all of the film's straightforward fun, Hudson gets quite philosophical when it comes to talking about its loftier ambitions, in terms of how it deals with fear. "Because fear is a natural emotion and a lot of [the film's] about fear and how you can become very constrained by that. And also socially that it basically leads to fascism, that fear is the emotion that's used to make terrible mistakes. Overcoming fear of the monster, of the thing that's 'wrong' or 'bad', is a really, really important part of growing up."

It seems that for an idea that originated more than 200 years ago, *Frankenstein* clearly still has a lot to offer storytellers.

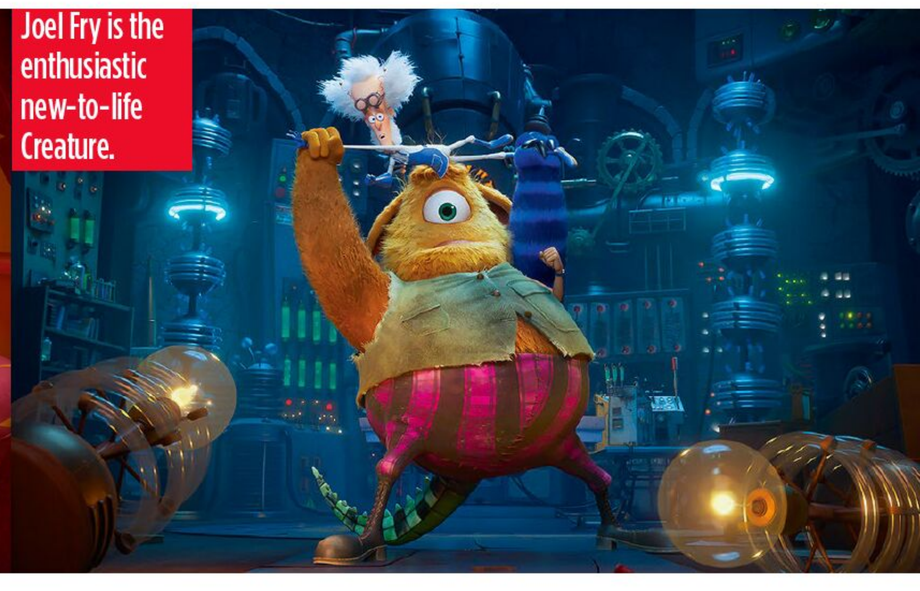
Stitch Head is in cinemas from 13 February.



Brave human girl Arabella goes along for the ride.



The titular Stitch Head is voiced by Asa Butterfield.



Joel Fry is the enthusiastic new-to-life Creature.

SCI-FACT! **Hudson's nods to classic films include several Kubrick references, invoking *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*.**



Smile: For The Camera promises more chilling grins.

Thought *Smile* was freaky? There's plenty more to come.

EDITOR EXCLUSIVE

Silent Screams

Horror hits **Smile** and **A Quiet Place** join IDW's Dark imprint

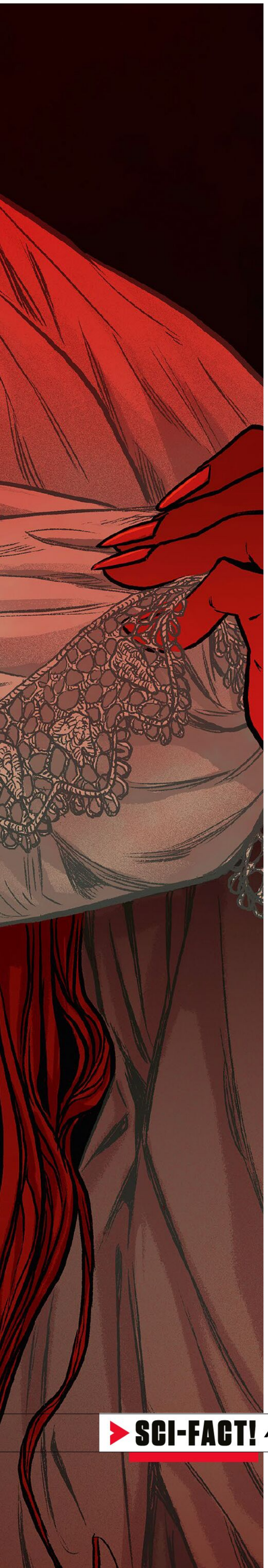
WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

FROM THE INSIDIOUS DEMONIC Entity of *Smile* to the aurally challenged alien invaders of *A Quiet Place*, you couldn't get more different than IDW Dark's latest two offerings. Written by Hannah Rose May and illustrated by Miriana Puglia, *Smile: For The Camera* is a prequel to Parker Finn's original 2022 film, while Phil Hester and Ryan Kelly's *A Quiet Place: Storm Warning* takes place around the same time as 2024's *A Quiet Place: Day One*.

"IDW has always been known for its excellent horror comics – *30 Days Of Night*, *Locke And Key*, *Beneath The Trees Where Nobody Sees* and *The Exorcism At 1600 Penn*, to name a few – and when we came up with the idea for an all-horror imprint that included licences, who better to turn to than our partners at Paramount, who just happen to be home to some of the most influential horror properties to ever grace the silver screen," editor Heather Antos tells Red Alert. "I'm a huge fan of both the *Smile* and *A Quiet Place* franchises, so the opportunity to get to be trusted to tell additional stories to expand both universes is quite the honour and privilege for any horror fan!"

Having worked with Hannah Rose May on Image series *Rogues' Gallery* and on *The Exorcism At 1600 Penn* at IDW – in addition to the forthcoming sequel *The Exorcism At Buckingham Palace* – it was Antos's close relationship with the Irish writer, actor and former model that prompted Antos to choose her to script *Smile: For The Camera*. "We were chatting about the Dark line in general when I mentioned the *Smile* property," she recalls. "Hannah, being a huge fan of the films and Parker Finn's work, leapt at the opportunity to pitch. To bring the Entity to the early 2000s world of high fashion was all Hannah – stemming from her experience in that industry during that exact time."

Antos also praises artist Miriana Puglia and colourist Dearbhla Kelly. "They've fully embraced the bright poppiness of the era and the luxurious glamour of the red carpet and the lights," she continues. "They do such a good job





Storm Warning expands the world of *A Quiet Place*.



Could we learn more about the demonic Entity in *Smile*?

of making you feel safe in the real world, that it really is quite jarring when the Entity starts to take hold!"

With Parker Finn having outlined the rules of the *Smile* world, both he and the *A Quiet Place* filmmakers have had a hands-on role in the development of their particular title. "From signing off on story to selecting the creators involved," says Antos. "It's important to us to make sure the stories we bring to the comics are as authentic to the films as they can be."

With *A Quiet Place*, there was the added challenge of creating an at least mostly silent comic series. "Funnily enough, of all the pitches we submitted to the filmmakers for *A Quiet Place*, the one they selected is the 'talkiest' of the bunch," says Antos. "Bouncing back from 'before' and 'after' the Creatures arrive in the story has allowed us to show contrast between boisterous family arguments in the middle of town to a single splash of water feeling like it's encroaching thunder – the sound effects of which our letterer Nate Widick has been doing an excellent job on."

With wordless issues let alone miniseries being a rarity in commercial comics, Hester played a crucial role in *Storm Warning*'s development. "Comics are a visual medium, first and foremost, and Phil was part of the

"It's important to make sure the comics are as authentic as the films"

conversation surrounding *A Quiet Place* from the very beginning," continues Antos. "In fact, the concept of a silent comic was something we had to get Paramount onboard with, as to them it was a bit of a foreign concept. Bringing on a writer with such a historic background as an artist as well was key to that – someone who can not only tell a brilliant story, but can also see it. Ryan is able to take the layouts Phil does after the script is approved and truly bring them to life. One of Ryan's great strengths is how grounded and real he is able to make his panels feel, as his worlds really feel lived in."

Long-time collaborators Hester and Kelly have evidently put a lot of themselves into the five-parter, which is set in the fictional town of Pearl, Iowa during some extremely wet weather. "I can't speak specifically to what Phil and Ryan are bringing from their own Midwestern lives into *A Quiet Place: Storm Warning*," says Antos. "But as someone who grew up deep in the Midwest myself I can speak to the authenticity of the pride in humble lives that those in the Midwest often have, that we see through in this series."

Smile: For The Camera is out on 18 February, A Quiet Place: Storm Warning is out on 11 March.

SCI-FACT! ***A Quiet Place: Storm Warning*'s fictional Iowa town Pearl is based on Sabula, located on an island in the Mississippi.**



Rachel McAdams gets into survival mode.



The film sees a worker and boss stranded together.

PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE



Survival Strategies

Mayday! Mayday! Sam Raimi returns with bloody castaway thriller **Send Help**

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"I THINK AUDIENCES should just expect the unexpected," says producer Zainab Azizi, teasing Sam Raimi's twisty and twisted survival tale *Send Help*.

Raimi's much-anticipated return to cinema after 2022's Marvel joint *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness*, it's a film that hides its blood-spattered secrets behind an irresistibly simple pitch. Two work colleagues – obnoxious boss and dowdy, put-upon underling – find themselves marooned in paradise, their power dynamic flipped.

"Linda [Rachel McAdams] is a hard worker," shares Azizi. "She's been working at this company for several years. She's been promised this promotion by her boss, and her whole life is her job. She's a little kooky, she's a little weird, but she means very well and she's a hard-working bee. Unfortunately, the boss passes away and the young son, Bradley (Dylan O'Brien), inherits the company. He's charming, he's entitled and he's a bit of a jerk!"

A plane crash strands the mismatched pair on a tropical island, where Linda's hobbyist survival skills give her the upper hand over the injured exec. Soon, makeshift spears are flying, severed hog heads are being lobbed and a primal battle of wills is underway. As Linda so rightly states, "We're not in the office anymore, Bradley."

Is it horror? Psychological thriller? Brutal black comedy? Or simply a cautionary fable for HR departments everywhere?

"I'd describe it as a dark comedy thriller. Having Sam as the director, of course there are some bits of horror, given that he is the horror master. There's a lot of comedy to it, too. When we cast Dylan, he just completely elevated it. He's so funny and he brought more laughs to the screen than were written. And Sam, as you know, loves to blend the genres, so while it was written as a psychological thriller, a lot of comedy showed up!"



Dylan O'Brien as the much-disliked Bradley.



> The island itself is a character in this film

The two must overcome their differences to survive.

Was it a challenge to navigate those tonal shifts? "It's so much in Sam's wheelhouse. We worked with his editor, his long-time collaborator Bob Murawski, and Bob is a magician. Rachel and Dylan just gave it their all – we did many takes where a scene either went all the way comedy or all the way dark. That's the magic of Bob and Sam; they were able to really fine-tune it in the editing room and find the perfect balance."

Comparisons have been made to *Misery*, Rob Reiner's Stephen King adaptation, and Robert Zemeckis's *Cast Away*, which exiled Tom Hanks with only a friendly volleyball named Wilson for company.

"I understand why people would make those comparisons, but this is definitely an original film," says Azizi, who pounced on the pitch by screenwriters Mark Swift and Damian Shannon, best known for 2003's slasher icon title-bout *Freddy Vs Jason* and 2009's *Friday The 13th* reboot, along with the smirky big-screen *Baywatch* (2017).

"They're amazing writers. They sent over a document with a bunch of loglines of different ideas. I read two sentences about this film and said, 'That's the one!'

"Linda is overworked and undervalued and underpaid. We've all been Linda. Everyone's had a terrible boss. I just felt that it was a very universal and yet original hook. I brought it to Sam to produce and he loved it so much that he wanted to direct it.

"For him, it's always about the characters. He always loves stories about rooting for the underdog. He had a great chuckle about the characters. He just loved the story of Linda Liddle, her journey from the start of the film to the end. It was definitely character first for him."

As Azizi tells Red Alert, Raimi brought his visceral touch to the film's set-piece plane crash sequence. "It's written as a simple plane crash, but directed by Sam Raimi it's drawn out, it's tense, it's ridiculous. You're laughing, you're grabbing your seat. It's scary. It's exciting. That's an example of how Sam made it into something very, very special."

Crucial to the whole project was the choice of location, one that needed to be both a photogenic backdrop and a dramatic crucible.

"The island itself is also a character in this film. We scouted many countries and we specifically shot in Phuket, Thailand. It was beautiful. The water was blue, the sands were white, it was lush. Although the story becomes dark, Sam wanted audiences to feel they were living a fantasy as well."

So how does *Send Help* fit into the Raimi canon? "If I were to use two films of Sam's to compare it to I would say *Drag Me To Hell* and *A Simple Plan*..."

Interesting blend, offers Red Alert. Azizi smiles, keeping those tropical secrets close. "Yes, it is!"

Send Help is in cinemas from 6 February.

SCI-FACT! **Raimi was once set to direct a Swift and Shannon screenplay about the Bermuda Triangle, but it remains unmade.**

SCI-FACT! **Human Fly stuntman Rick Rojatt's feats include jumping 27 buses on a Harley-Davidson powered by hydrogen peroxide rockets.**



Dracula rises from beyond to take on the Human Fly.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE



The Count returns in a number of different eras.

Out For The Count

The Lord of the Undead takes on the Eternal Stuntman in **The Human Fly Versus Dracula** WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

A REAL-LIFE CANADIAN stuntman, The Human Fly's escapades were turned into a Marvel comic in the late '70s. In a new four-part series of 52-page graphic novels by writer Jim Krueger and artist Peter Lawson, IPI Comics are now revealing that not only have there been many incarnations of the buggy superhero, dating back to the 1700s, but that they've also been regularly battling none other than the Lord of the Flies himself – Dracula.

"Licence holders Human Fly International wanted something that suggested that the character had been around for a long time," Krueger tells Red Alert. "That then got me thinking if there have been many Human Flies throughout history – they must represent mankind's heroic nature as we get knocked down and no matter how many bones we break, we figure out a way to stand up again.

Instead of a bad guy for every era, Krueger needed a common enemy to pit against all the various Flies. "The Human Fly is about survival, and Dracula suggests the opposite, even though he spans the generations," continues Krueger. "He's a damned being that has lost the spirit of his own humanity, so it felt like it was the best of humanity in the Human Fly vs the worst of humanity in Dracula as a cursed being, who feeds on other humans."

Subtitled *Conflict Across The Centuries*, issue one of *The Human Fly Versus Dracula* opens in 1776 with the Human Fly of the 1770s, while issue two and three introduce the Human Flies of 1864 and 1929 respectively. "The story of the Human Fly of the 1770s happens during the American Revolution, and I'm playing not only with the history of the characters, but also with the events of the time period," says Krueger. "The 1860s Human Fly is a totally different character, as his story is set during the American Civil War and his goal is not to fight for either the North or South as he's been positioned solely to do harm to Dracula on a do or die mission."





Expect a glorious throwback of a tale.

A look at some of the early sketches for the series.

We meet Human Fly of the '20s in 1929, on the cusp of the Great Depression. "She begins as a flapper, which I like as it's a pun on flies!" laughs Krueger. "Her story happens during the Jazz Age and the time of gangsters like Al Capone as the series takes a turn towards the truly dark by the end of that issue."

With issue four focusing on the '70s Human Fly – who IPI Managing Director Gerry Huntman confirms is "the same Human Fly depicted in the Marvel Comics, a '70s-style stuntman" – we can also expect connections between the different incarnations. "There's lots of flashbacks to earlier issues, such as when we explain the star emblem that's part of the Human Fly costume," says Krueger. "The more we get into it, the more people are going to be able to see pieces of the story emerging, and I'm also writing it in such a way that there could be other stories told in-between these issues to other time periods."

The Human Fly Versus Dracula is on Kickstarter now.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Love Always Dies

Skybound bring out the horror in **Phantom Of The Opera** for their Universal Monsters line

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

NOW BEST KNOWN FOR Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1986 musical, *The Phantom Of The Opera* has been adapted for the big and small screen – and in many other mediums – on numerous occasions since Gaston Leroux's original novel was first published in 1910. Now, Skybound Entertainment are adding the Angel of Music to their Universal Monsters line with a new four-issue miniseries by writer Tyler Boss and artist Martin Simmonds.

"My first encounter with the Phantom was actually the *Goosebumps: Phantom Of The Auditorium* novel," laughs Boss. "It's one of the things I find so wonderful about all of the Universal Monsters, that way they have such big ubiquitous themes that they can either work as a Young Adult book, a stage show, a film or, in our case, a comic book. But what drew me specifically to the Phantom was just that I thought I had an interesting story to tell about him; something that hadn't been done with him before."

Boss and Simmonds used the 1943 remake directed by Arthur Lubin and starring Claude Rains in the title role – which actually shot on the same elaborate stage set as Universal's 1925 version – as a starting point. "While I love Lon Chaney's performance in the 1925 movie, the 1943 film being less known in some ways made it easier for us to tell the story we want to tell within all the trappings that fans expect from a *Phantom* adaptation," explains Boss. "Ultimately, the Phantom has a really simple story: a young woman, Christine, is stalked by a man who lives in the basement of her workplace, the Paris Opera. So then we ask ourselves, 'What is it about that story that excites us?' and in our case we really wanted to inject the horror back into the story. The Phantom should be scary!"

With Boss describing it as "a certain kind of a love story and a more difficult kind of love story than maybe the audience would expect", the Phantom's obsession with young soprano Christine Dubois is at the heart of a series of violent crimes at the Paris Opera. "I wrote this as a pure gothic horror story and within that genre, romance and love are always a component of it," he says. "But our story also involves a police investigation into the ever-increasing death toll."

Though the Phantom is actually alive, he's initially believed to be a ghost, and Boss says he couldn't have asked for a better haunted house to set his story in than the Paris Opera House, with its lavish surrounds. "That's the universal sensation that Gaston Leroux tapped into when he wrote the original story," he continues. "He really knew how to create an urban legend. I'm sure most readers will already know that the chandelier did indeed actually fall from the ceiling. Sadder still, it killed a poor usher on their first day of work at the Palais Garnier. So how do you make the story more exciting than just a tragedy? Blame it on a ghost!"

Universal Monsters: The Phantom Of The Opera is out on 25 February.



New life is breathed into the Phantom in comic form.

SCI-FACT! **The 1943 *Phantom* was the first film shot entirely in Technicolor, and the only Universal Monster movie nominated for an Oscar.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Impossible Princess

Dante collides with Shakespeare in otherworldly anime **Scarlet** WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

TO BE OR NOT TO BE? For Mamoru Hosoda, there's a very simple answer to this loaded Shakespearean question.

"The main driver for me in making this film is doing something that doesn't exist," says the acclaimed Japanese auteur behind such anime hits as *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, *Summer Wars* and the Oscar-nominated *Mirai*. "Because it didn't exist, I thought we had to make it."

Hosoda has willed into existence what might be the strangest and most ambitious movie of his career. An epic four and a half years in the making, *Scarlet* begins as a gender-flipped riff on *Hamlet*, recounting the familiar tale of fratricidal power games in 16th century Denmark.

A determined Princess Scarlet picks up the sword, vowing vengeance on the scheming uncle who has murdered her father and seized the throne.

"I wanted to take life and death and revenge as a theme," Hosoda tells Red Alert. "When I started this project we were just coming out of Covid and I thought, 'Finally, peace is going to be upon the world again!' But that's when a lot of geopolitical conflicts began to break out. Watching the news, I saw this cycle of vengeance happening around me.

I felt this was a timely theme to explore. And one of the original revenge stories is *Hamlet*.

"But I didn't want to end my film where the main character gets revenge and the cycle continues. I wanted to explore what happens next, and the salvation that comes from it."

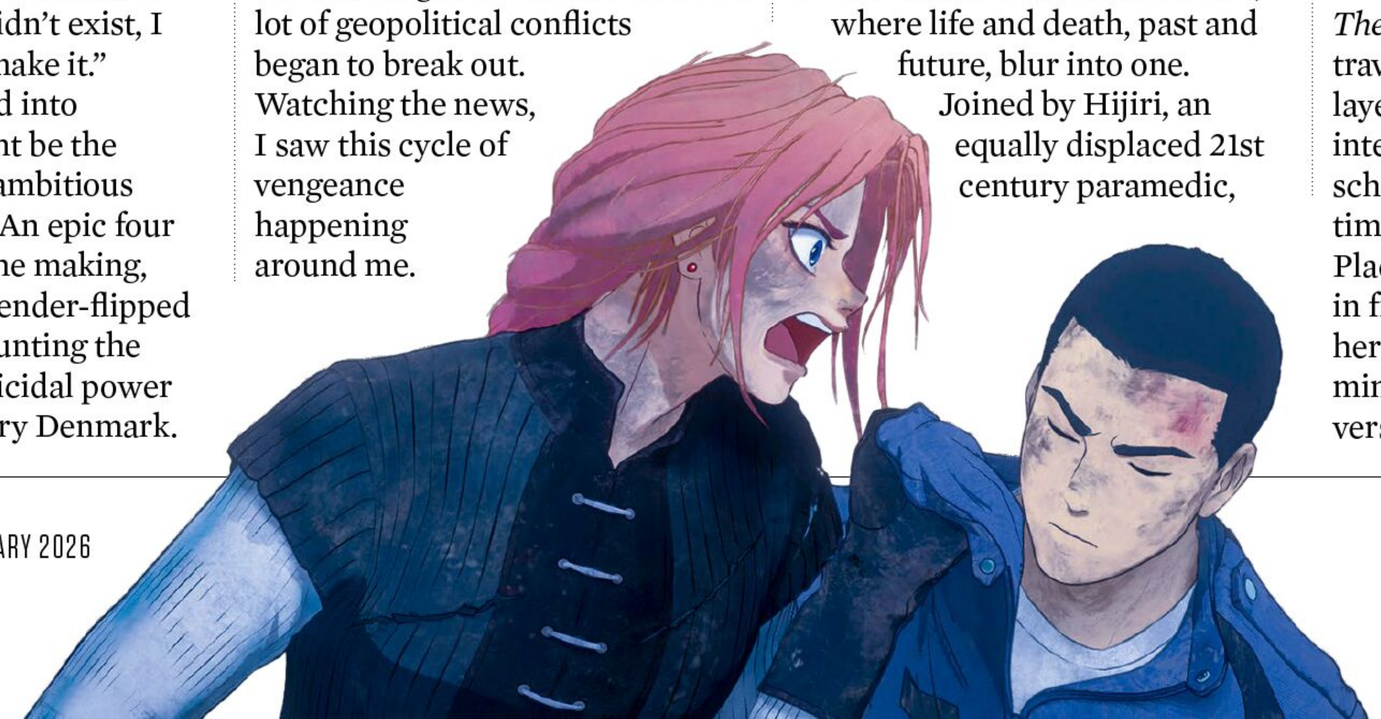
It's here that Hosoda decisively breaks from the Bard. Poisoned, Scarlet wakes in the Otherworld, where life and death, past and future, blur into one.

Joined by Hijiri, an equally displaced 21st century paramedic, she sets off across the bandit-infested wastelands of this limbo, seeking a legendary stairway to the Infinite Land – and a final reckoning with her uncle.

"We're transported to another world – this hellscape, if you will. And it's here that Scarlet meets a bunch of different people and begins to question her motives for revenge.

"This is also inspired by Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, where Dante travels through all the different layers of Hell. I thought it was very interesting when I read it in high school – 'Wow, this is like a time-travel type of mechanic!' Placing these different characters in front of our protagonist causes her to question her life and her mindset. 'Was there a different version of this life that I could







Scarlet is essentially *Hamlet* – with a twist.



The princess is on one hell of a revenge mission.

“The visual language needed to match the scale of the story”

have lived?’ I think that realisation is something that makes her quite attractive as the main character.”

Scarlet finds Hosoda pushing both the look and the creative technology of anime. The richly textured landscapes of the afterlife blend traditional 2D animation with 3D CG imagery to create a dazzling hybrid.

“There’s always this conversation: ‘Is hand-drawn better? Is CG better?’ Like we have to choose one. But I thought, ‘Well, they both have their means of expression, and things they are good at and perhaps not so good at.’ So instead of seeing them as opposing ideologies, I looked at them as a means or a method of animation, and I wanted to take the best of both worlds and develop this new visual language.

“As a film, and in the themes it deals with, *Scarlet* is massive in its scale. Life and death, the princess, the visual expression, the action. We’re not just looking at a high-school kid in a small Japanese village, like some of my past films. So I felt that the visual language needed to match the scale of the story and what we were trying to convey, which is why we took on this new and daunting challenge. If we had done this using more traditional animation methods, I don’t think it would have cost us four and a half years! Trial and error alone took about one and a half years. We’re developing something new. We’re exploring and entering the unknown in terms of how hand-drawn and 3D can merge.”

Scarlet follows 2021’s *Belle*, Hosoda’s highest-grossing film to date. It’s the kind of success that breeds expectation, priming an audience for a certain style of screen experience. Is he ready to become a brand? Or does he guard against that?

“Meeting that audience expectation is certainly one role of a film director,” Hosoda tells Red Alert. “But in addition, directors need to ask, ‘What should I make? What does the world need right now?’ Film is more than just meeting audience expectations. It’s communicating on a deeper level and bridging our understanding of each other. So there’s certainly the desire versus the want, and both should coexist in a director’s filmography.”

Scarlet is in cinemas from 6 February.



The Bard’s source material remains at the forefront.



Yutaka Matsushige voices punchy Cornelius.



Unlike the play, *Scarlet* is also set in the “Otherworld”.

SCI-FACT! **Mamoru Hosoda was Studio Ghibli’s original choice to direct *Howl’s Moving Castle*, but exited over creative differences.**

ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

In For The Kill

Madelaine Petsch takes the knocks in **The Strangers – Chapter 3**

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

IN SLASHER MOVIE parlance Madelaine Petsch is the Final Girl. And as she stands alone against a trilogy-capping slaydown in *The Strangers – Chapter 3* she's all about the finality.

"With the first two films, the biggest complaint I received was 'It doesn't feel like a finished film,'" Petsch tells Red Alert. "And the answer is 'Because it's not!' It's act one, act two and act three of a giant story. I've never seen that done before, where you're guaranteed three parts of a film that have already been shot but we're not giving you an ending to each one. It feels a little less satisfying, in the way that audiences are used to being satisfied. So this one should give them '[exhales] Okay, I got the satisfaction I'm looking for...' Hopefully!"

2024's opening instalment saw director Renny Harlin retell *The Strangers*, Bryan Bertino's blood-spattered home-invasion tale from 2008. It cast Petsch – best known as troubled cheerleader Cheryl Blossom in *Riverdale* – as Maya, an ill-fated visitor to Venus, Oregon, a treacherous backwoods town where the lack of dependable phone coverage is the least of your concerns.

Chapter 2, released last September, began to unlock the secrets of Scarecrow, Dollface and Pin-Up Girl, the blank-masked psychos whose idea of rural recreation involves menacing knocks on the door ("Is Tamara here?") and random acts of butchery. Now *Chapter 3* finds a brutalised Maya with blood on her own hands as she confronts the killers.

"Because I'm shooting over the course of three films, there has to be a very clear arc," says Petsch, remembering how she mapped Maya's trauma across the trilogy. "I had, in essence, a murder board, with red string everywhere: where she starts, how to get to each place, where those character breaks happen, how that affects her emotionally, physically and mentally for each moment. There was a level of preparation and awareness that I wouldn't necessarily bring to every role but for this it had to be so clear."



The trailer shows Maya in the Pin-Up Girl mask.

Petsch shot the three movies back-to-back. "It was definitely a marathon." Did she pace herself? "I did not. I did 100% every day, which is why when I was done, and I was straight back to filming *Riverdale* season seven, I was a shell of myself! But my body is pretty good at this point, 11 years into my career. When I need to work, I can shut off any other needs for my body and I'm able to work as long as I need to every day.

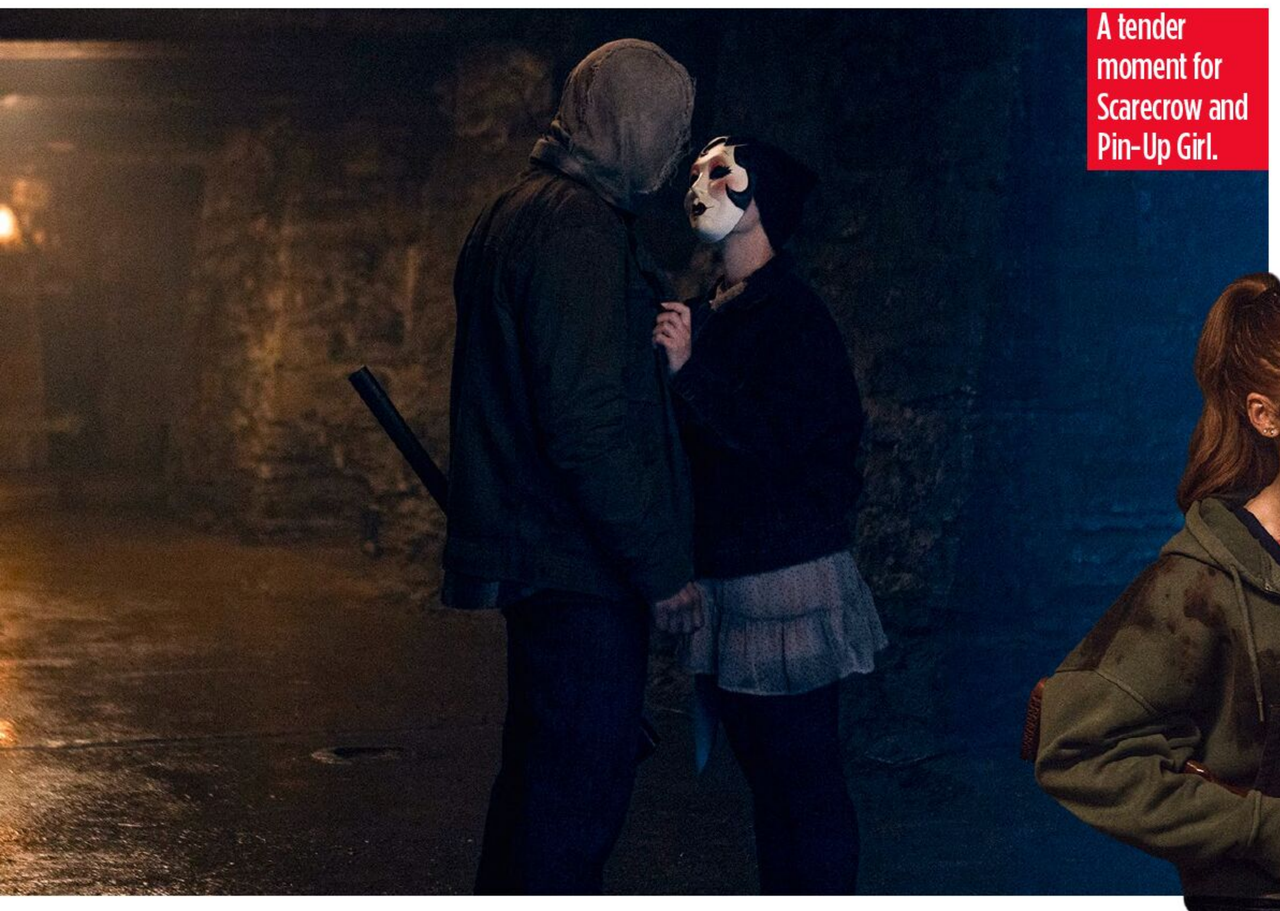
> **"I had, in essence, a murder board, with red string"**

No sleep, no food, no whatever. I just power through."

On film Petsch sells the essential aloneness of Maya – a challenge, Red Alert suggests, given she's surrounded by crew every second she's performing.

"There's a level of me that always feels isolated as a human being. That's just part of who I am. But at the same time you're kind of bred not to notice those things. You can't be thinking about the guy holding the boom above your head or you're never going to sell what you're doing.

"But also it was such a gift to shoot it across the world in



A tender moment for Scarecrow and Pin-Up Girl.



Maya (Madelaine Petsch) learns: why her?

PICTURES © LIONSGATE/JORDY CLARKE/JOHN ARMOUR.

Slovakia, where I didn't bring my phone to set. No one was awake [in America], so no one could bother me. Madelaine was really left in LA and Maya was born in Slovakia."

Her dedication to Maya's story found her not only working on the script but stepping into the editing bay, where she spent some 60 days helping to cut the movies. "This is the first time I've ever gotten to be sewn into the fabric of every single piece of film," she shares. "I met with Renny and [producer] Courtney Solomon before they offered me the role, and I had 25 pages of notes. I was like, 'I think it's great. I think it could be better.' And that can go one of two ways in a Zoom, but I'm such a big lover of the original IP that I was like, 'I'm only going to do this if it's honouring the things I love.'"

Yes, Petsch isn't just a Millennial Scream Queen, she's a genuine, self-confessed fan of the genre. "I lean a little more European in horror. I'm a really big Gaspar Noé fan. I like the really fucked-up, introspective, psychological horror more than the gory killing stuff, but I also loved and have seen every *Saw* movie a hundred times! I like it all, honestly.

"Horror takes risks. Filmmaking right now is the least risk-taking we've ever seen it. They're just carbon copies of things we've already seen. Horror is the only genre that consistently doesn't do that."

The Strangers – Chapter 3 is in cinemas 6 February.



Gregory (Gabriel Basso) returns – is he trustworthy?

SCI-FACT! ***Chapter 2*** **and** ***Chapter 3*** **saw additional filming, partly in response to audience feedback on** ***Chapter 1*****.**

SCI-FACT! **Royal Mail's first set of SF-themed stamps was a quartet devoted to HG Wells, released in June 1995.**



Hawkins Post

Royal Mail have released a set of 14 *Stranger Things* stamps to celebrate the final season of *Stranger Things*. Featuring artwork from Kyle Lambert, who created the iconic posters for the series, the stamps also include hidden logos that are revealed when using a UV light.

As well as the stamps, a range of collectable items are also available.

Visit royalmail.com/strangerthings





Love Bites

Just in time for the most romantic day of the year, Super 7 are releasing Super Duper Plush Mothra '64 in Valentine pink, inspired by the 1964 film *Mothra Vs Godzilla*. This cuddly kaiju stands 8" tall – but if you can't deal with all that mushy stuff, there's also a more traditional brown variant.

Available at super7.com



Boxing Clever

Our shelves are already groaning under the weight of Umbrella's limited edition Blu-ray sets, so what's one more? *Universal Horror: Monsters And Curiosities* collects 45 of the studio's rarely-seen cult treasures, ranging from *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom Of The Opera* (1925) to *The Raven* (1963).

The Collector's Edition set is numbered, comes with art cards and a 100+ page hardback book, and was recently endorsed online by Guillermo del Toro. Grab one quickly!

Pre-order at shop.umbrellaent.com.au



NEW AUTHOR

VENETIA CONSTANTINE

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND ROMANTIC FANTASY *THE LAST STARBORN SEER*



Tell us about your protagonist.

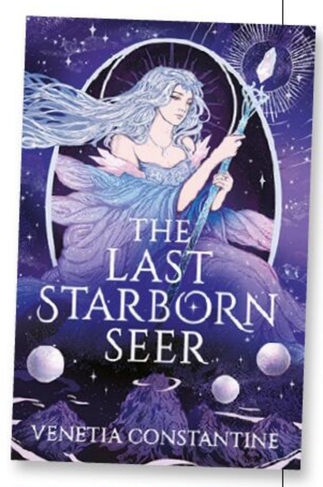
→ Leilani Stellarion is a princess shunned by her family and court; last heir to a dangerous Starborn magic which grants her visions of the future, but is slowly corrupting her mind; her dying realm's only hope and its greatest liability.

Was there a particular inspiration?

→ *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S Beagle – that idea of being the last of your kind – haunted me as a child. Soon after reading it, an image popped into my head of a young woman staring up at a mountain.

How long did the book take to write?

→ The idea percolated for decades, but the first draft poured out of me in a few months. I then spent several years editing and zero-drafting the remaining books in the trilogy.



Is much research necessary for a book like this?

→ I do a fair amount, because I like to ground my worldbuilding in reality. For example, I loved discovering there's a rainbow-hued river in Colombia, caused by aquatic plants. This became the basis for my Opaline River.

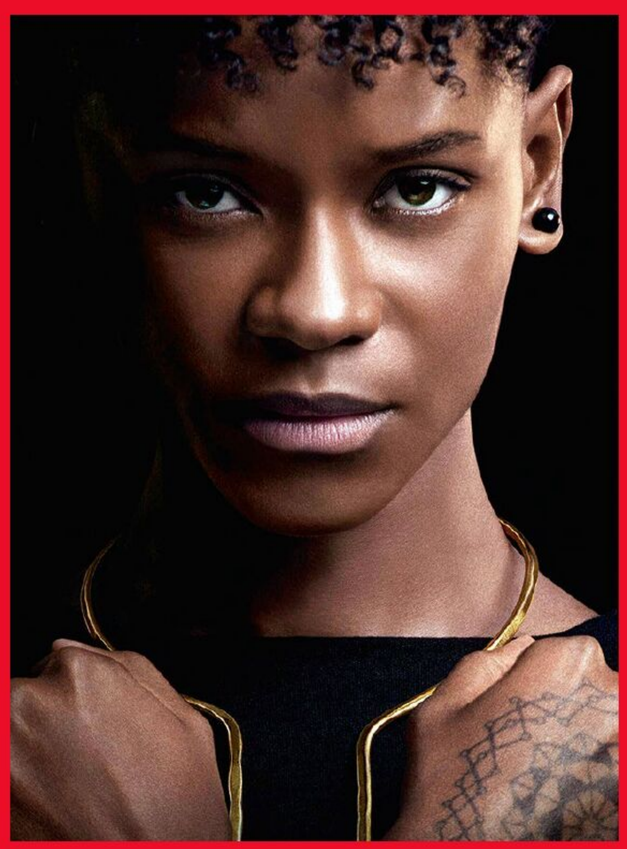
Any advice for would-be authors?

→ Don't worry about making the first draft perfect; the earliest version of a story just needs to exist. But you must finish it, because you can't edit a blank page. Writing a book is a marathon, not a sprint, so remember to celebrate all the milestones along the way.

The Last Starborn Seer is out on 5 March, published by Aria.



Beauty And The Beast's villainous **Gaston** is set to headline his own movie. Disney is developing a live-action take written by *Spider-Man: Across The Spider-Verse* word-slinger Dave Callaham.



Black Panther's Letitia Wright confirms that Shuri has a part to play in **Avengers: Secret Wars**.

NEWSWARP
Breaking Genre News!

Two to beam up: ex-Punisher Thomas Jane boards the *Enterprise* as Dr "Bones" McCoy in the fifth and final season of **Star Trek: Strange New Worlds**, alongside Kai Murakami as a young Sulu. Expect them stardate 2027.

Babylon Berlin's Lars Eidinger goes green as villain Brainiac in James Gunn's Superman sequel **Man Of Tomorrow**.

Jason Isaacs joins Prime Video's live-action **Tomb Raider**.

JJ Abrams is heading to **The Great Beyond**. That's the newly disclosed title of his next movie, reportedly the tale of a fantasy author whose mythical world turns out to be real. Glen Powell and Jenna Ortega star.

Showrunner Ryan Condal confirms that *Game Of Thrones* spin-off **House Of The Dragon** will end with its fourth season. Season three arrives on HBO this year.

The Duffer Brothers adaptation of Stephen King's **The Talisman** is dead as a Demogorgon. "Sadly, *The Talisman* is no longer at Netflix, so we're not involved," shares Ross Duffer, while brother Matt adds, "I think it was probably naive of us to think we could break *The Talisman*."

Emmy-winning *Chernobyl* director Johan Renck is set to helm the live-action **Assassin's Creed** series. *Say Nothing*'s Lola Petticrew stars alongside Toby Wallace, while *A Knight Of The Seven Kingdoms*' Tanzyn Crawford joins the regular cast.

It's official: the **28 Years Later** saga is a trilogy. Sony Pictures are moving ahead with another zombie-infested instalment.

James Cameron is itching to return to the world of **The Terminator**. He aims to nail down the story in the next few months, "once the dust clears on *Avatar*". Arnie won't be back.

And that's not the only project keeping Big Jim busy. Seems his long-gestating remake of 1966's shrinkadelic classic **Fantastic Voyage** is back on: "I'm working with a director right now with a new script," he tells *Deadline*.

Mads Mikkelsen joins the cast of Martin Scorsese's eerie new movie **What Happens At Night**.

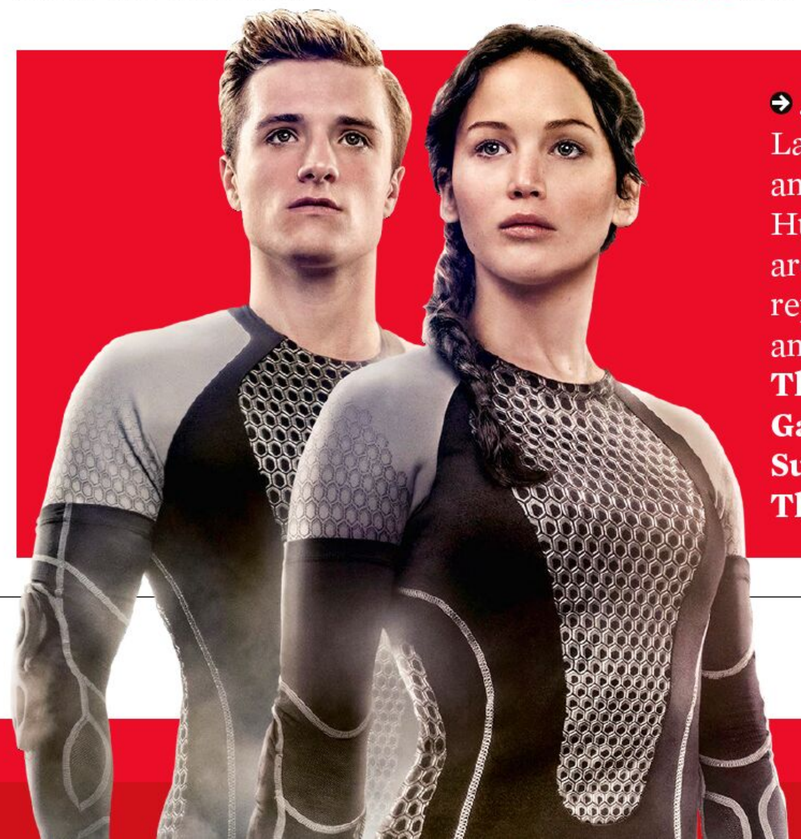
Paddington's Paul King is bringing the **Labubu** toy craze to the big screen.

Bad Boys: Ride Or Die screenwriter Chris Bremner is tipped to resurrect the **Men In Black** brand for Sony Pictures.

Triple threat Vin Diesel will not only star in and produce but also write the screenplay of **Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots**, bringing the tabletop punch-up to the screen.

Oscar-winning cinematographer Erik Messerschmidt will bring his fine eye to Gotham City in Matt Reeves's **The Batman: Part II**, with Scarlett Johansson in the frame for the female lead.

The Conjuring's James Wan is teaming with Blumhouse supremo Jason Blum to revive the **Paranormal Activity** franchise. Strap on your night-vision goggles!



Jennifer Lawrence and Josh Hutcherson are set to reprise Katniss and Peeta in **The Hunger Games: Sunrise On The Reaping**.

PICTURES: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST © DISNEY/LAURIE SPARHAM, THE HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE © LIONSGATE, BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER © MARVEL STUDIOS/WALT DISNEY PICTURES/ALBUMALAMY.

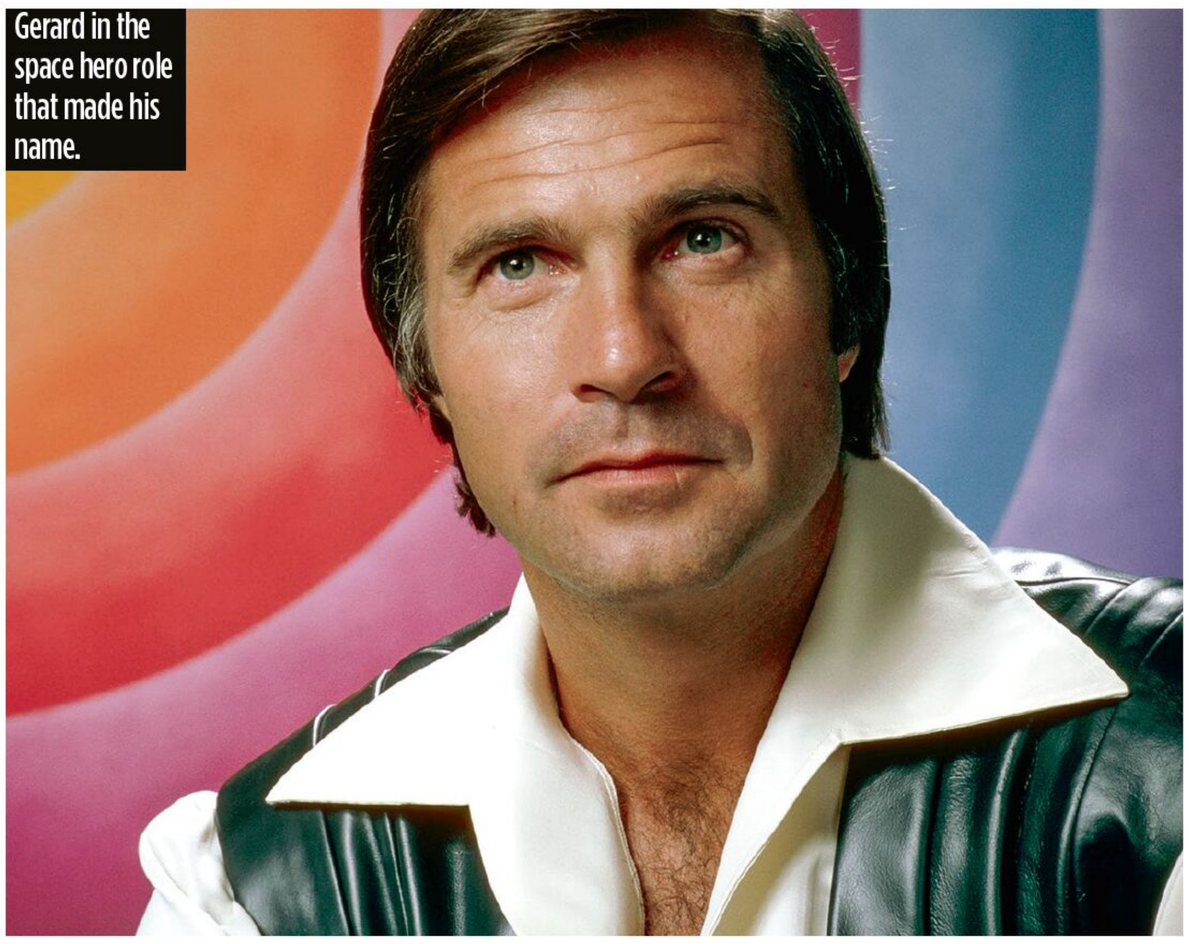
SCI-FACT! In 2015 Gil Gerard voiced Megatronus in three episodes of *Transformers: Robots In Disguise*.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

GIL GERARD 1943-2025

Remembering TV's Buck Rogers

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



Gerard in the space hero role that made his name.

GIL GERARD ALMOST missed his appointment with the 25th century. "I just didn't want to get involved with it," he remembered of the offer to play time-lost astronaut Captain William "Buck" Rogers, the role that would win him TV stardom. "I turned it down without reading it... twice."

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Gerard considered becoming a foreign missionary before majoring in mathematics. After a stint as an industrial chemist he moved to New York City in 1969, studying drama and supporting himself by driving a cab after hours.

One life-changing fare led to a job on *Love Story* (1970). A three-year gig on daytime soap *The Doctors* followed in 1973, while some 400 commercials enshrined him as a familiar small-screen face. Roles in *Hawaii Five-O*, *Little House On The Prairie* and disaster flick *Airport '77* led to the offer to play Buck Rogers.

Series co-creator Glen A Larson wanted Gerard for his "sly, virile sense of humour", while producer Bruce Lansbury saw him as a major star in waiting: "He's James Garner, Burt Reynolds, all those people – given the chance." At first Gerard feared the kind of comic-strip stigma that had derailed Adam West's career post-*Batman* – "Bop! Biff! Bam! All that bullshit!" – but was won over when he finally read the script. "[Buck's] a human being, not some plastic figure without feelings."

Buck Rogers In The 25th Century ran between 1979 and 1981, undergoing a season two revamp that Gerard loathed ("It was such a rip-off of *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica*"). Open about his struggles with addiction following the show's cancellation, he went on to star in 1990's short-lived eco-thriller *EARTH Force* and hosted firefighting reality show *Code 3* before reuniting with *Buck Rogers* co-star Erin Gray in 2007 TV movie *Nuclear Hurricane*.

HERB BALL/NBCU PHOTO BANK/NBCUNIVERSAL VIA GETTY



Brotchie with *Doctor Who* star Ncuti Gatwa.

© BBC STUDIOS/BAD WOLF/LARA CORNELL

AMANDA BROTCHIE 1968-2025

Australian director Amanda Brotchie was responsible for two acclaimed episodes in the 2025 series of *Doctor Who*: "Lux", which pitted Ncuti Gatwa's Time Lord against the memorable animated foe Mr Ring-A-Ding, and "The Well", which saw the return of the malevolent entity from the David Tennant episode "Midnight".

Co-creator of *Lowdown*, the award-winning Brotchie also helmed episodes of *Riot Women*, *Renegade Nell* and *Gentleman Jack*, along with the TV version of *Picnic At Hanging Rock*. In the theatre she wrote and directed the play *Headlock*.

In the mid '80s Brotchie was also a vocalist for Melbourne band Not Drowning, Waving, who blended rock, ambient and world music genres, and held a PhD in linguistics from the University of Melbourne.

Paying tribute, *Doctor Who* showrunner Russell T Davies called her "Bright and sharp and kind and questioning and always determined to make things better, better, better... God, we adored her."

BOB BURNS III 1935-2025

Archivist, film historian and occasional gorilla Bob Burns III was raised in Muskogee, Oklahoma. When his family moved to Burbank, California he found himself in Hollywood's orbit, visiting the set of Republic serial *The Purple Monster Strikes* as a 10-year-old. "That day changed my life," he recalled.

Over the decades he assembled a huge collection of original props, costumes and memorabilia, displayed in an informal private museum he christened Bob's Basement. Items included the last surviving 18" armature of King Kong, the Time Machine from the 1960 movie, and treasures from the *Alien* franchise.

Co-publisher of *Fantastic Monsters Of The Films* in the '60s, Burns also performed on-screen, playing an alien in 1957's *Invasion Of The Saucer Men*. Wearing a gorilla suit, he appeared in *Rat Pfink A Boo Boo* (1966), and was Tracy, simian assistant to a pair of paranormal investigators in 1975 kids' show *The Ghost Busters*.

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WHAT'S THAT OVER

MONARCH: LEGACY OF MONSTERS BUILDS ON ITS SUCCESS BY ADDING MORE TITAN BATTLES AND PLENTY OF INTERPERSONAL DRAMA INTO SEASON TWO

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

COMING



THE HILL...



IT'S STARTLING TO REALISE that Legendary's Monsterverse is now 12 years into its successful Westernised reboot of Toho's Godzilla franchise. There have been five feature films, an animated series, and an ongoing comic book series. Perhaps most surprising is that one of the best spinoffs within the mythology is the Apple TV series *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters*.

The first season was released in late 2023 with modest expectations, but proceeded to impress fans, critics and even those uninitiated with the lore by being a thrilling, generational, character-centric piece that also featured cinema-worthy visual effects. It also had the special weapon of the father/son casting of Kurt and Wyatt Russell to play past and present versions of US Army colonel Lee Shaw. By the end of its 10-episode run, it became the Monsterverse's new benchmark for how to make its humans as interesting as its Titans.

For series producer Tory Tunnell, who runs Safehouse Pictures with her partner Joby Harold and works with Legendary Television and Toho, the success of *Monarch*'s first season confirmed that they had developed a unique model inside the franchise.

"The combination of being a globetrotting adventure, and having theatrical, cinematic VFX with a very intimate character drama made us incredibly unique," Tunnell tells *SFX*. "We love the fact that we have monsters in an authentic world. Monsters are real. We play it very, very grounded. And once you're in that grounded space, even though monsters are real, it allows you to explore real, authentic human emotionality as well."



Kurt Russell returns as the older Lee Shaw.





The love triangle of Lee, Bill and Keiko is further explored.

RETURN TO HOLLOW EARTH

The heart of the show lies in the complex connections between the Randa and Shaw families. In the '50s, scientist Keiko Miura (Mari Yamamoto), cryptozoologist Bill Randa (Anders Holm) and Colonel Lee Shaw (Wyatt Russell) are some of the first staff of Monarch, a Japanese-American coalition created to hunt and research MUTOs (Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organisms). Their complex bond will continue over generations, through their progeny, and remain intact with the re-emergence of Titans on G-Day, as depicted in *Godzilla* (2014).

Season one established the show's signature past/present parallel storylines, then did some science-y time-jumping of two years in the season finale. Season two picks up with the repercussions after Keiko is rescued from Axis Mundi, a pocket between Earth's surface and the Hollow Earth, by her adult son Hiroshi (Takehiro Hira) and granddaughter Cate (Anna Sawai), coder May (Kiersey Clemons) and a middle-aged Shaw (Kurt Russell) who gets left behind. Going back to find him becomes a Randa family priority, but they'll need to travel back to Kong's domain of Skull Island to make it happen.

Season two was shot in Queensland, Australia, and Tunnell says the new locale continues their high standard of visual storytelling. "We felt like, let's find another location where we can give our viewers that travel porn – where you get to go and experience a world of wish fulfilment, maybe a little bit exotic – and carry that torch in a way that is part of what makes our show *our* show."

Timeline-wise, this season takes place before the events of *Godzilla: King Of The*



A flashback to a 1957 research trip in South America.



VFX supervisor Sean Konrad's Titans are a sight to behold.

CREATING TITAN X

Producer Tory Tunnell explains the process of birthing their bespoke Titan X for season two of *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters*

The brand-new Titan X will demand the focus of both the characters in the flashback story and the current story as season two begins. "It's really exciting to launch a new monster here, and with [VFX supervisor] Sean [Konrad's] collaboration, it feels dynamic and exciting and something we haven't seen before," Tunnell says.

It originates from the Southern Hemisphere, and Tunnell says conversations started with Konrad researching real species native to the areas where they're telling the story. "Sean will often invite us on Zooms to look at species that are real. You think you're an educated human, and you know what creatures exist on this planet, and then suddenly Sean shows you things and you're like, 'Oh, my God, that's *real*? Where is *that*?'," she laughs.

"We really want to have these new Titans rooted in reality, so we spend a lot of time making sure that they make sense, like the way that they're moving, or whatever their fuel is, and that the whole idea is integrated. We're also trying to match it thematically with what we're doing in the show. There's a lot of conversations that go into it."

When it comes to naming a new Titan, Tunnell says the script will often reference it generically. "We've designed it, but only in the post process will we say, 'Okay, let's come through and see what that will be.' And that is really fun. There are always some outrageous contenders, like 'How did *this* end up on the list?', and then sometimes that's exactly the one we go with. We're always trying to have the names be somewhat intuitive, or [in this case] feel like it's a more Latin-based name. We're thinking about what makes sense, and then you always have a code name, and then suddenly it just feels like *that's* the name."

Monsters, with parallel flashbacks to a 1957 Titan (the more colloquial name for a MUTO) research trip to South America with Keiko, Bill and Lee. The series continues to exist within the broader canon mythology, threading a needle through the spaces left unexplored in the films. "[Executive producer] Matt Fraction, who was an amazing partner in season one, would talk about it as 'dancing through the raindrops' of those spaces," Tunnell says of the philosophy their follow to find safe places in the timeline to create their stories.

Thematically, season two continues to dig into the contemporary fallout of Cate and her half-brother Kentaro (Ren Watabe) trying to understand how their father led a double life, supporting two families while secretly working for Monarch. "It felt like there was a lot of interest in that storyline," Tunnell says. "Why did Hiroshi have these two families? We danced with it a little bit in season one, but we felt like it was actually a rich opportunity to continue to look at the legacy of this family. Who doesn't love a good, juicy secret, and to really understand where people are coming from and why they are who they are?"

That's also reflected in the unrequited love triangle in the past, which in season one established Shaw and Keiko's simmering feelings, that they purposefully suppressed because of her love for Bill. "Between young Lee and Keiko, we had this really beautiful scene in season one where they're dancing and they have a night that almost was," Tunnell points out. In this season's flashbacks, the complexity of that push and pull will continue and mirror the conundrum of Hiroshi's current situation of being in love with Cate's mother and Kentaro's mother.

Season two pushes Keiko into uncomfortable emotional places in the present as a Rip Van Winkle-esque character. She's coming back from the Axis Mundi →





still young, reunited with an older Shaw, and only just finding out that Bill died on Skull Island (as portrayed by John Goodman as older Bill in *Kong: Skull Island*).

"It's a unique opportunity, and other shows aren't able to give that kind of storytelling," Tunnell says of Keiko's situation. "It's unique to us with our Axis Mundi rules of time. It allows us to have her consider both the relationships she had in the past – some of which are here in the present at different ages. What does that mean? There are a lot of questions she needs to ask and a lot of re-evaluations. Also, that's [played] against urgent time... that is really exciting and dynamic, and something we haven't seen before."

At the same time, Cate is adrift regarding what she's supposed to do with her life after all they've experienced in season one. "There's the relatable feeling of not feeling like you're enough, of feeling like you don't belong, of feeling like it's all your fault, and that's where she starts our season," Tunnell explains. "Anna, of course, pulls it off with such beauty and grace, and you're so invested in her character. The fun of watching the show is seeing how that transforms and seeing how she is able to overcome those classic identity crises, or misunderstandings of who you are, and understanding what she actually is capable of."

TITANS ASSEMBLE

Working with such a distinguished cast to bring these complex characters to life, Tunnell says they had many conversations with the actors to develop individual character arcs, fleshing out ideas about how we become who we are. "What are those moments and inflection points that really push us?" she says. "And how, with the choices that we make, we sometimes pretend to ourselves that those choices only impacted us."

Tunnell says bringing back Kurt and Wyatt Russell to further develop Shaw in both eras of his life was a no-brainer because of the huge audience response, and the actors wanting to continue. "They have so much fun playing the same character. Their process behind the camera is also really involved. I'm not even privy to all of it because they're obviously spending a lot of time together off-camera. But they're building the roots of that character in Wyatt's timeline – how [Shaw] becomes more defined as we all become more defined as we get older, and what that looks like."

From that comes a lot of emotional fallout, raw and unpredictable, which is a big part of

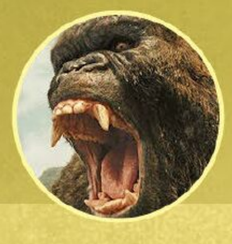


Anna Sawai, Takehiro Hira, Ren Watabe and Kiersey Clemons.

THE MONSTERVERSE TIMELINE

How to watch the films and shows of the Monsterverse in chronological order

KONG: SKULL ISLAND (2017)
Events take place in 1973.



NETFLIX'S SKULL ISLAND (2023)
Events take place in the early '90s.



GODZILLA (2014)
G-Day referenced in the Monarch series set in 2014.



MONARCH: LEGACY OF MONSTERS SEASON ONE (2023)
Events take place one year after G-Day and in the season finale, time jumps two years. Flashbacks take place from 1952 to 1959.

MONARCH: LEGACY OF MONSTERS SEASON TWO (2026)
Events take place right after the season one finale. Early flashbacks take place in 1957.

GODZILLA: KING OF THE MONSTERS (2019)
Events take place in 2019.



GODZILLA VS KONG (2021)
Events take place in 2024.



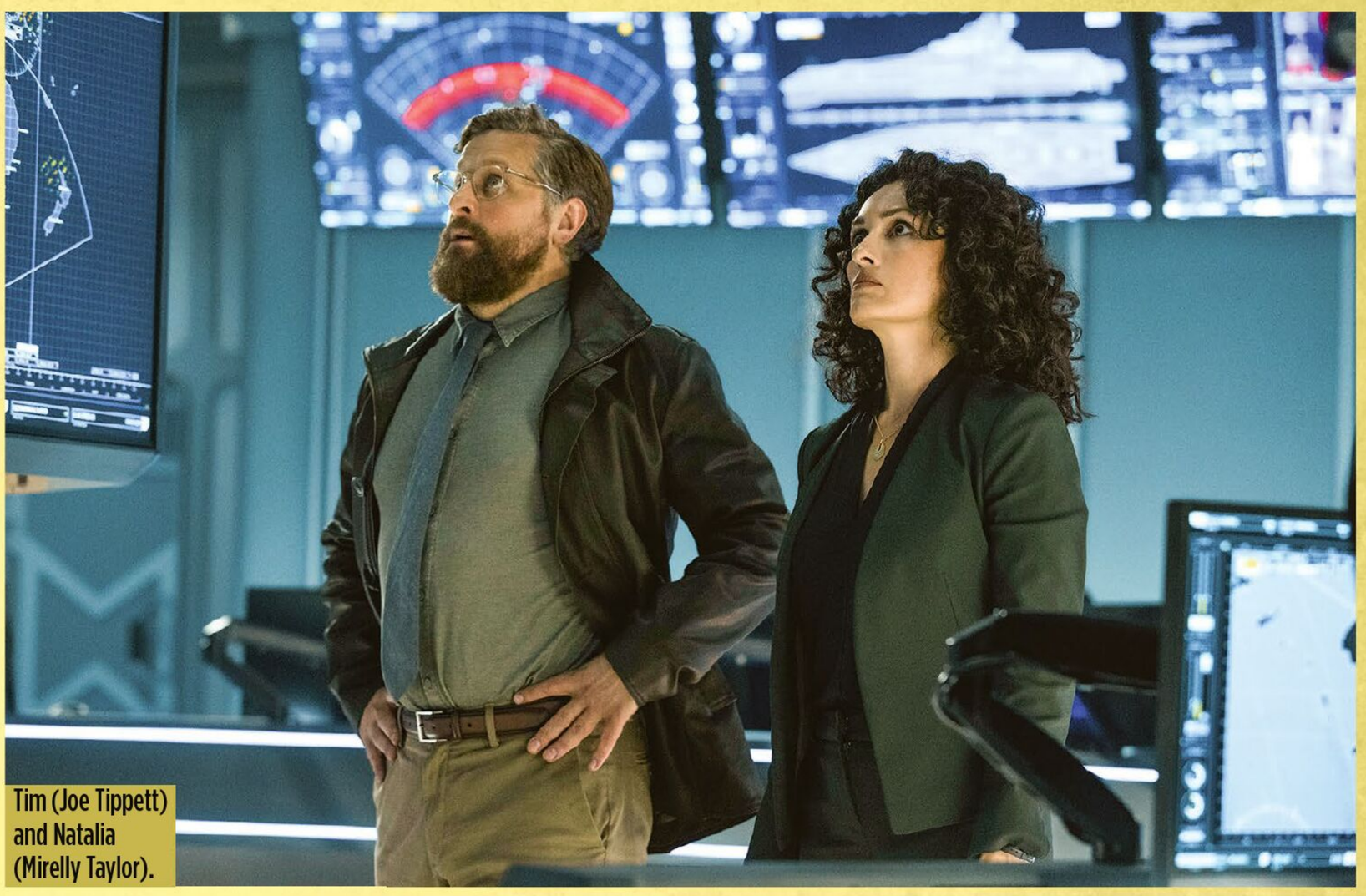
GODZILLA X KONG: THE NEW EMPIRE (2024)
Events take place in 2027.



GODZILLA X KONG: SUPERNOVA (2027)
Events take place TBD.

PICTURES © LEGENDARY PICTURES, WARNER BROS, NETFLIX.





Tim (Joe Tippett) and Natalia (Mirelly Taylor).



Someone's woken up on the wrong side of the bed.

what makes *Monarch* feel so different from other Monsterverse projects. "There's so often a trickle-down effect that feels invisible to us because we've healed and moved on, but others around us haven't," Tunnell says of what the characters come to discover this season. "We often talk about the theme of hurt people *hurt* people. Sometimes in our show, the monster is 300-feet tall, and sometimes it's the person sitting next to you. To be able to spend 10 hours in one season talking about why our characters are who they are, as they're also going on their own exterior quests and interior quests – that duality is what we find to be so fascinating."

Then there are the Titans, which are still very much present in season two and continue to look like they've been plucked straight from the feature films and placed into the series. Hero monsters Godzilla and Kong are confirmed to return, along with a bespoke Titan that will open the season.

"We are so lucky to have Sean Konrad, who we think is among the best out there," Tunnell says of the VFX supervisor who worked on *Godzilla* and *King Of The Monsters*.

"We always want our show to feel intentional. We want it to line up with the movies"

Konrad is the VFX supervisor for *Monarch* too, where he continues to spearhead the series' Visual Effects Society Award-nominated creatures. "His standards are so high that when [something] is absolutely, breathtakingly excellent, he's like, 'It's fine.' We love that kind of quality control," she chuckles.

Tunnell confirms that finding and learning about this new Titan will be a big part of both the past and present storytelling. "Without giving any plot away, we're really invested in keeping the spectacle of the monsters, but also the spectacle of our environment," she says. "We think the environment really plays into that conversation, and it's partly dictated by the Titans that we're working with. The story really is on a rail this season, in a way where the problem to solve is really urgent and really exciting and really dynamic. We continue to be on the move, so we still capture that globetrotting feel. We keep you guessing, we keep it interesting, and we keep it moving."

She also hopes that the show's positive reputation means more eyes on it for season two. "We always want our show to feel intentional," Tunnell says of their careful storytelling. "We want it to line up with the movies. We think that's incredibly fun for us, and we imagine it's fun for our viewers to see that intentionality built in. If you're a super fan, you've seen all the movies and you've always loved the Toho monsters, it fits exactly with everything you know. And at the same time, we made the show very intentionally for an audience that might not know anything about Godzilla. Feedback that we've gotten, and we're really proud of, is how people have been surprised by our show. They hadn't necessarily expected the level of real characters and drama in this world, something the features also achieved, but we have *more* time to [explore] it."

With the announcement last autumn of a young Lee Shaw spinoff prequel series, featuring Wyatt Russell but set during the Cold War, as well as the development of other series, it begs the question of whether *Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters* might end with this season.

"We have been so invested in making season two the best it can be that we haven't really spent time talking about season three," Tunnell answers. "But we always have the ambition and there's always more story to tell in this world. Of course, it'll be up to audiences loving the show and telling all their friends to make it more likely that we have those real conversations."

Monarch: Legacy Of Monsters returns to Apple TV from 27 February.

STOCK ART: KE77KZ\GETTY

STORAGE SPORES

DAVID KOEPP'S *COLD STORAGE* BURSTS TO NEW LIFE ON SCREEN

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

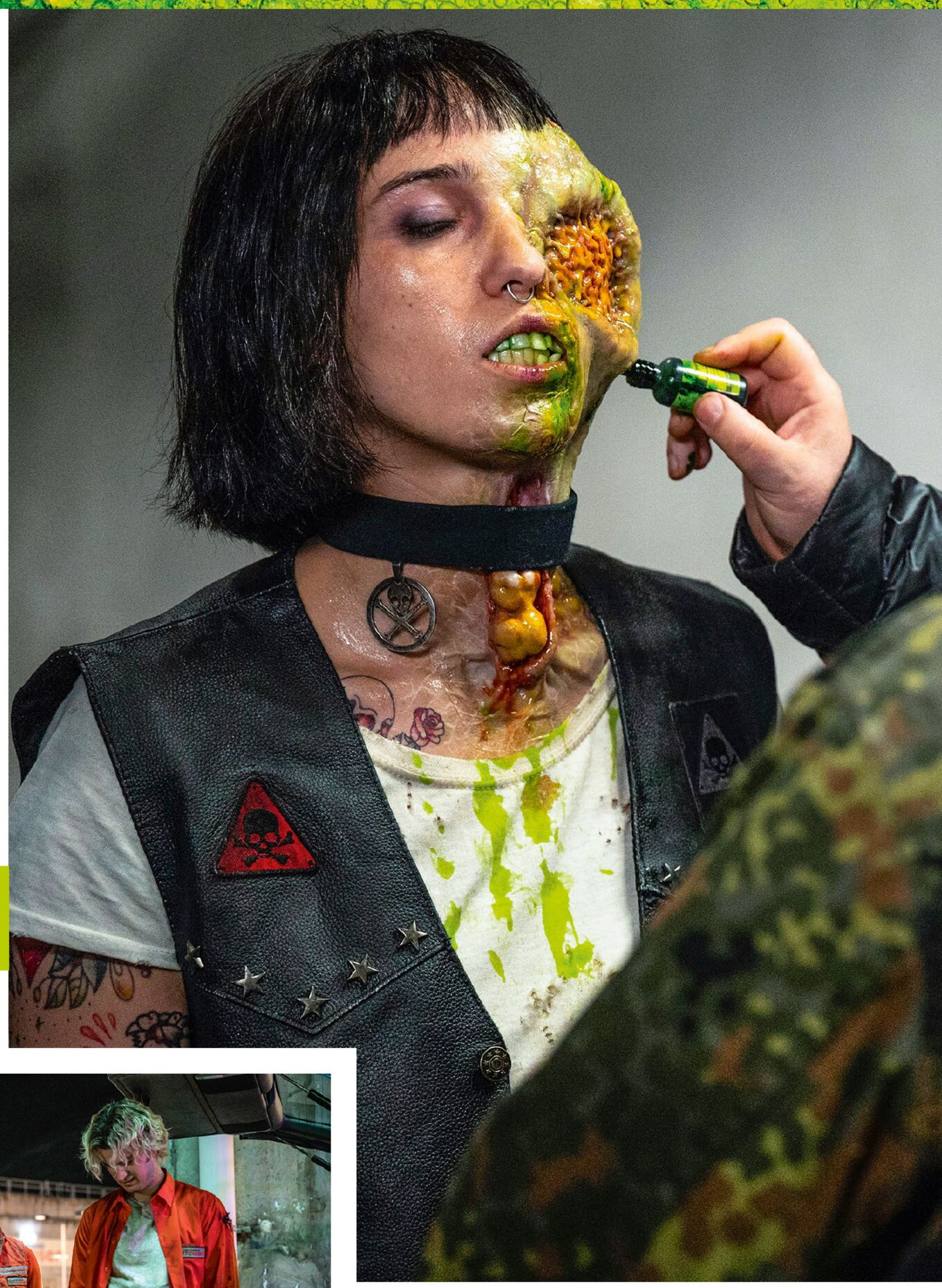


PAY ATTENTION. THIS SHIT IS REAL.

THIS STARK WARNING SLAMS ONTO THE screen at the start of *Cold Storage*. The same words – minus the accompanying thunderclap – greeted director Jonny Campbell on the script's opening page. He tells *SFX* that they hooked him immediately. "It gave you a clue that this is serious, but serious with an attitude," he says. "It's kind of confident. Audacious. You know that it's going to be a witty ride. And this shit *is* real: there are lots of facts in there."

Adapted from his own debut novel, *Cold Storage* adds another entry to David Koepp's prolific history of book-to-screen adaptations, following screenplays for Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World*, and Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons*, among many others. "Dave is a master storyteller," Campbell enthuses of Koepp, whose original screenwriting credits include *Death Becomes Her*, *Panic Room*, *Jurassic World Rebirth* and the forthcoming *Disclosure Day*.

Campbell read *Cold Storage* shortly after its publication in 2019. "It hijacked me – kidnapped me, put a bag over my head, drove me around, and threw me in a basement. In a positive way!" he laughs. "The stakes, the landscapes, the epic and the microscopic, the extraordinary and the ordinary."



Cold Storage sees humans infected by fungus.

David Koepp's collaborations with Crichton are immediately evident in the film's science-driven opening, which charts the fall from orbit of Skylab, a space research station carrying a highly adaptive fungal organism, Cordyceps novus. Most of the debris burns up on re-entry, but some fragments crash to Earth. NASA recovers every piece – except one.



Liam Neeson, Georgina Campbell and Joe Keery star.

Fast-forward to 1987 and a bioterror response team from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency – including Robert Quinn (Liam Neeson) and Trini Romano (Lesley Manville) – arrives at a settlement in Western Australia to find the population decimated. Many of the dead hang from trees, their ribcages torn open from within. The film's grisly imagery, Campbell says, draws loose inspiration from the real-world Cordyceps fungus, which seizes control of a host's mind and motor functions, compelling it to climb to higher ground before rupturing to disperse its spores.

"I think what intrigued Dave scientifically," he continues, "is how close something like this is to being a reality – which just adds to the tension." Campbell contrasts the miniscule threat with the "very large and very destructive" dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park*. "In many ways, this monster is even more pernicious and devastating," he emphasises.

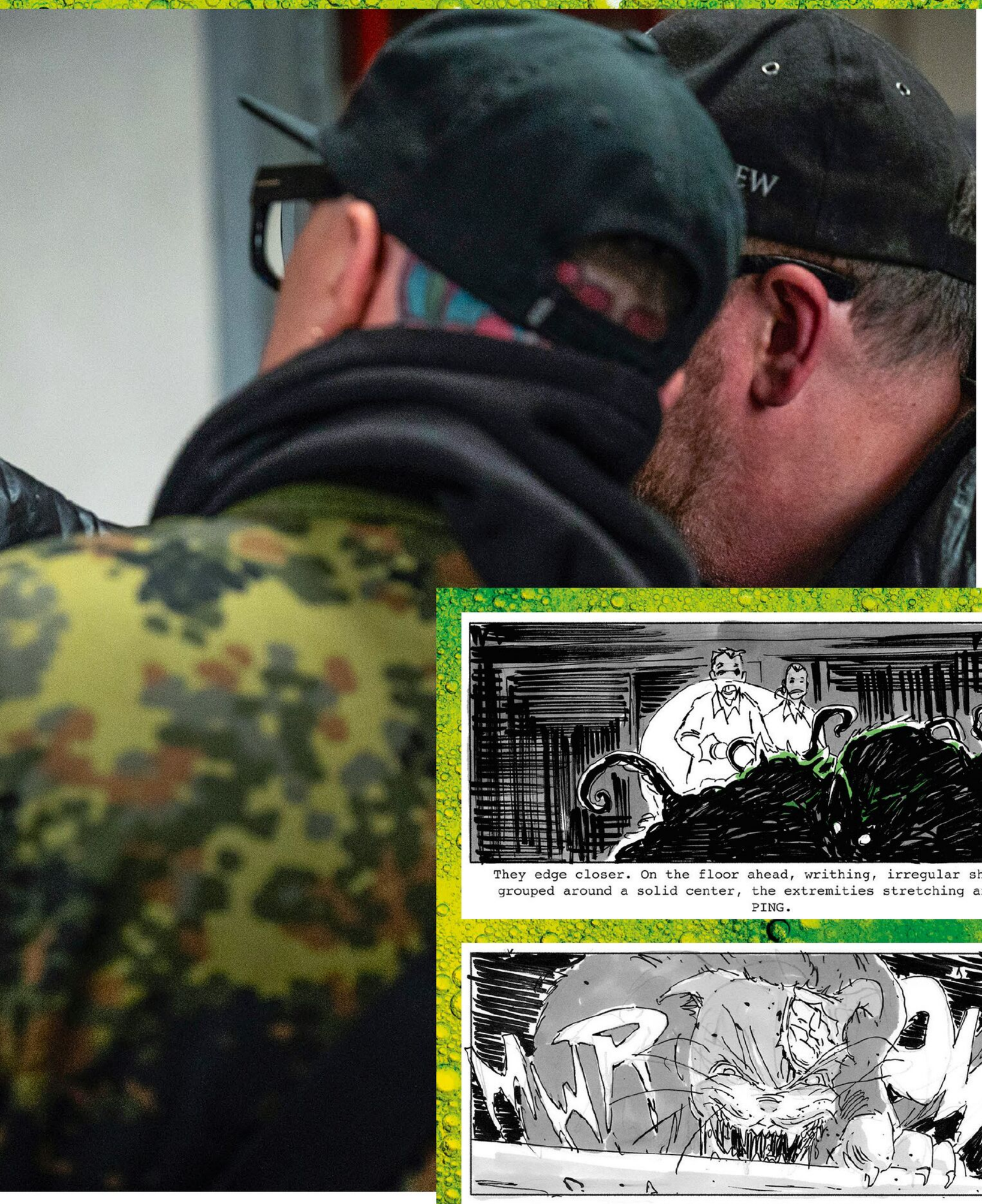
The operatives succeed in containing the organism, and it's transported away in an armoured truck. The direction the story is heading – and the irreverent tone with which it intends to get there – is signalled as the fungus



The organism is originally captured and sealed away.



Neeson is fast making a name in comedy.









From rat kings to exploding cats, this film has it all.

is sealed deep beneath a military installation in Kansas, to the sound of The Beach Boys' "I Get Around".

PEST CONTROL

Campbell has long been drawn to "darkly comedic" storytelling. The sensibility runs through his work, from the Ant and Dec-starring *Alien Autopsy* and the zombie drama series *In The Flesh* to *Doctor Who*'s "The Vampires Of Venice" and Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat's reimagining of *Dracula*. It was his handling of humour on *Dracula*, he says, that led Koepp and the other producers of *Cold Storage* to offer him the job – an opportunity he immediately embraced. "The book has a sly, knowing sense of humour," Campbell says, explaining his attraction to its tone. "It knows exactly what it is."

He cites a lineage of classic sci-fi and horror as key touchstones, including *The Andromeda Strain*, *Alien*, *The Thing*, *An American Werewolf In London* and *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, the novel of which is even seen being read by one of the central characters. Balancing those influences meant walking a careful tonal tightrope, with *Cold Storage* "shifting and mutating" as it unfolds. "Hopefully in a pleasing and unpredictable way, in terms of how it ramps up," Campbell says. "It's not a flat line all the way through. After starting with something serious, there's a bit of a rug-pull moment where it aligns more with everyday life, and the sinister, threatening nature of the danger escalates, with hopefully humorous consequences as well as the drama."

"They're ordinary people with issues – saving humanity isn't top of their agenda"

That rug-pull comes after the opening credits, when the story jumps to the present day. The military base is long gone, built over by a vast self-storage facility. One night, an unwitting cockroach comes into contact with the buried organism – which, as Campbell explains, "in a sort of Darwinian way learned how to survive" and mutated into something far more lethal – and, in a darkly comic sequence shot from its perspective, crawls through the complex's pipes and service tunnels, carrying the infection back into the outside world. From there, the shit we were warned about duly hits the fan, as animals and humans alike become infected and rupture from within, bursting apart in catastrophic sprays of blood and tissue that propel the organism towards new victims.

At the centre of the chaos are night shift security workers Teacake (Joe Keery) and Naomi (Georgina Campbell), later joined by surviving DTRA operatives, including Robert Quinn. "It starts as just a completely normal day at the office," Campbell notes. "As in the trailers, Liam's character says, 'You started the day as night shift workers, and now you're a Green Light team.' They're ordinary people with their own issues – saving humanity isn't exactly top of their agenda that day. They've got their own personal shit to deal with."

Campbell is effusive about Keery. "I think he's an utter superstar," he says of the young actor. "Frankly, he was absolutely brilliant – extremely professional but also inspiring. →



Director Jonny Campbell gets the infected up to speed.

He was a joy to work with. He's obviously been through the mill with *Stranger Things*, but he's just an all-round lovely guy. Almost too good to be true."

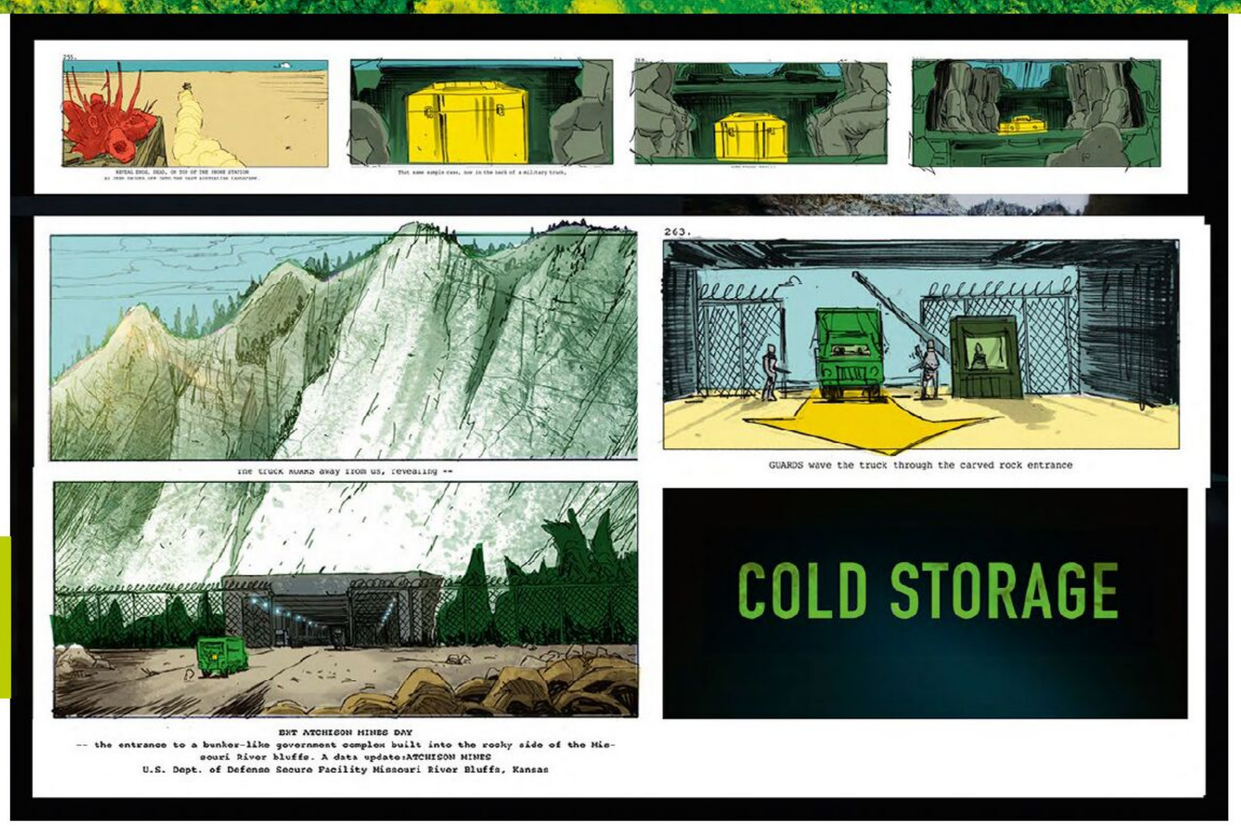
Neeson, meanwhile, was seen as the ideal fit for Robert. "We needed somebody who could combine that action-hero quality with a slightly self-aware edge," Campbell explains. "The movie moves between two time periods, with him being brought out of retirement. He was able to straddle that and play both brilliantly. And he's also making a name for himself – not as a comedy actor exactly, but as someone with a brilliant sense of humour, which was really necessary for the character."

Dame Vanessa Redgrave appears as Ma Rooney, a dotty local woman whose late husband's belongings are stored at the facility. Campbell says her casting came about following a suggestion from the film's costume designer Nicoletta Ercole (veteran of *Tentacles* and *Piranha II: The Spawning*), who had worked with Redgrave before.

Cold Storage is the first film to feature both Redgrave and her former son-in-law – Neeson was married to the late Natasha Richardson – though they don't appear together on screen. "It was a constellation that came together fortuitously," Campbell says. "She inevitably brings a huge amount of gravitas to the part. She's a scene-stealer."



Now that's how you open a movie – and a script.



More storyboards for the film's opening.

GOING OFF-BOOK

Reflecting on the film's pre-production, Campbell says the novel was central to its early development. "You totally absorb the book at the beginning of the process, and that shapes how you read the script," he explains. "At a certain point, you have to let the book go and move forward with the screenplay – which, let's face it, the same person has written."

The novel's influence found its way into the film in subtle ways. "There are certain things you try to imbue into the visuals that aren't necessarily in the script; small details that, if you've read the book, you'll notice," he continues. "They aren't the main event, but they inform you. It could be a car number plate, for example."

With just 90 minutes to tell a "densely layered story", some elements had to be pared back. "One of those things was the scientific specificity around the mutation speeds," Campbell notes. "It's a key part of the book, which we did look at trying, but it just felt like almost too much. Keeping the mystery was a better vehicle ultimately."

There was, however, one sequence that he was sorry to lose. "It's the bit where Liam's character gets pulled over by the police when he's trying to get to the cold storage unit. It's very, very funny in the book – very chilling and tense – but it just wasn't going to work in the narrative of the movie."

For Campbell, that book/script trade-off speaks to the pleasures of adaptation. "A cinematic experience has to be different to the book," he reflects. "You get something else out of it. If it was just a carbon copy, it would be a bit boring. This brings something new to the table."

PICTURES © STUDIO CANAL. STOCK ART: JOSE A. BERNAT BACETE/GETTY



Cordyceps erupts out of its victims' bodies.



Lesley Manville is Neeson's partner at the film's start.

Cold Storage's opening scene, set in Australia, was shot in the desert landscapes of Ouarzazate, Morocco, where production designer Elena Albanese built an entire ghost town from scratch.

"One funny anecdote – though not so funny at the time, as I could really have done with having these props arrive in time – was that some of the dead bodies strewn around got held up at customs," Campbell recalls wryly. "Perhaps that's not surprising. I can only imagine the poor guy opening the crate at the border got quite a shock!"

All of the storage facility scenes, meanwhile, were filmed in Italy. Campbell describes the building as their own haunted house of sorts. "It needed to feel really layered, and that meant combining multiple locations to create the different levels, spaces and tunnels," he explains.

One of those was Mussolini's bunker, built during the 1930s. "The exterior we created both on location and in the studio. That gave us the control we needed – it would have been quite tricky just doing that on location."

The film's more visceral moments leaned heavily on practical effects, overseen in part by British effects team Dave and Lou Elsey (*The Substance*). "It was a very ambitious palette of fungus and vomit and creature effects," Campbell says with a smile. "We did our best to get as much in-camera as we could, knowing it would later marry up with state-of-the-art visual effects."

"This has a retro popcorn vibe that some of the bigger movies don't, to my mind"

This approach, he explains, was crucial for the actors as it gave them a tangible sense of what was happening around them. "Rather than it just being green screen and someone describing what it's going to be like," he adds. "That's never the same."

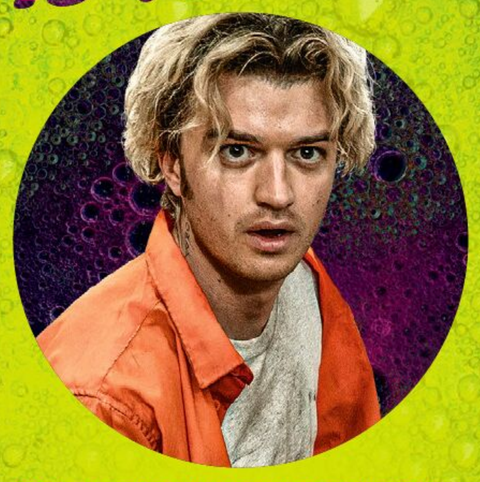
He points to a scene featuring a rat king – a writhing mass of rats bound together by their tails – as a case in point. "We had four people puppeteering and manipulating it," he says. "It was really important – and really effective – for Joe and Georgina to walk into that space and react to it." The creature was then enhanced digitally in post-production, "adding the icing to the cake".

Rat kings, rampaging deer, reanimated cats, copious splatters of green goo and gunk – even a gang of ill-fated television looters. It's all in a night's work for the employees of Atchison Self Storage.

"Pure horror is a bit one-note," Campbell concludes. "This has a retro popcorn vibe that some of the bigger movies don't, to my mind. It's like *The Goonies* for grown-ups; a joyride with thrills and laughs. Ultimately, it's supposed to be *fun*."

Cold Storage is in cinemas from 13 February.

JOE KEERY IS TEACAKE



Tell us about your character...

He is somebody who is very impressionable and wants to make other people happy, which has led him down a couple of bad paths. Maybe he's not a very good decision maker. And maybe his judgment in his youth was a little flawed, but I like that the character is somebody who has made some mistakes and is trying to get his life back on track. That's something I've always really connected with. Teacake is somebody who is just trying to do the right thing and put himself in a position to succeed, because he wants a better life for himself. His struggle is a very human thing in this heightened, insane story. The combination of those two things is very interesting to me because it grounds all the grandiosity of the effects and craziness. There's a real sense of what he is fighting for.

What was it like working with Liam Neeson?

Liam is killer. We grew up with his movies, so this was pretty crazy. Working with him was checking a big box for me. And Liam is very like his character in this – both are very no-nonsense! The cool thing about this movie is that it's like a Venn diagram: we've seen Liam in something like this before but now there's a new twist. He has done a lot of action, but this film will let people see him in a different light.

What was it about *Cold Storage* that interested you?

This film has a real engine behind it. It starts and does not stop until it's over. Along the way, there are some horrible, disgusting, shocking, tender and funny moments. It has everything. With that tone, you're walking a line. And this movie does so, which is so rare. Movies aren't being made right now with this kind of tone. I thought it was such an interesting throwback to the movies I grew up with.



IT'LL BE ALL FRIGHT ON THE NIGHT

RICH LAWDEN'S FEAR OF GHOSTWATCH LED TO A LIFELONG FASCINATION, CULMINATING IN A NEW BLU-RAY SPECIAL EDITION THAT PRESENTS THE BEST WAY TO RELIVE THAT TRAUMATIC HALLOWEEN NIGHT BACK IN 1992...

WORDS: **DANIEL KRUPA**

HOSTWATCHERS? PIPESPHOBES? There's never been the one nickname for everyone, you know?"

The observation belongs to Rich Lawden, and if we are to agree upon the name, he has a claim to be the world's pre-eminent "ghostwatcher". Not only is Lawden responsible for the 2012 documentary *Ghostwatch: Behind The Curtains*, but he's assembled a new Blu-ray edition, which sounds like it will be the definitive way to view *Ghostwatch* in the future – one which attempts to recapture what it was like to watch that original broadcast. The release is the culmination of an obsession that started on Halloween night, 1992.

"The three of us watched it together – myself, my mother and my father," he tells *SFX*. "I was the kid in the middle of these two grown-ups. Almost before it started, my father was pointing out the inconsistencies with either the continuity from the BBC or the fact that it had the *Screen One* ident [a drama anthology series that ran on the BBC from 1989-1998, following the demise of *Play For Today*] at the beginning and a 'written by' credit which appears in a flash. He took great delight in kind of stripping the engine, saying, 'No, that's done with a wire. You do that with a wire. This isn't real.' You know, he really took some pleasure out of that for some reason. Whereas, on the other hand, my mother was saying, 'Are you sure all of this is real?'"

TERROR IN THE ATTIC

Ghostwatch was, of course, done with "wires" – it was a pre-recorded 91-minute drama masquerading as a live broadcast. Hosted by trustworthy journalist and presenter Michael Parkinson, the show mounts an investigation into the paranormal, centring on unexplained activity plaguing a single mother and her two daughters living on Foxhill →





GHOSTWATCH: ON THE NIGHT – SPECIAL EDITION PRESENTATION: The landmark broadcast presented with its original BBC1 opening and closing continuity, restoring the full transmission experience as audiences first encountered it.

GHOSTWATCH – 888 MODE: The programme presented with baked-in, recovered original Ceefax subtitles, recreating the unique viewing experience available on the night of transmission – made possible by Jason Robertson.

AUDIO COMMENTARY: A newly-recorded commentary featuring Sarah Greene, Gillian Bevan and director Lesley Manning, reflecting on the broadcast, its legacy, and the extraordinary reaction it provoked.

STEPHEN VOLK'S "31/10": The official short-story sequel to *Ghostwatch*, presented in authentic Teletext format, continuing the mythology decades later.

"RETURN TO FOXHILL": A mini doc revisiting the original location, exploring how the house and its surroundings have changed – and how the legend endures.

GHOSTWATCH: BEHIND THE CURTAINS: A feature-length behind-the-scenes documentary examining the conception, production, broadcast and aftermath of *Ghostwatch*.

THE BROOM CUPBOARD: Sarah Greene speaks with Andi Peters to reflect on the broadcast, and to reassure young viewers who might have watched the programme on Halloween night.

BROADCAST TRAILERS: Original BBC promotional material from 1992.

GHOSTWATCH: ON THE NIGHT – TRAILER

GHOSTWATCH: BEHIND THE CURTAINS – TRAILER

EASTER EGGS: Featuring insights from a world-renowned horror author, additional original BBC continuity broadcast on the night and a brand-new interview with a member of the production crew.

COLLECTORS' BOOKLET: An exclusive booklet presented as an in-world artefact, delving deeper into the mythology surrounding Foxhill Drive, uncovering previously unrevealed details and expanding the legend for dedicated fans.

Drive, Northolt, a mundane suburb of Greater London. But *Ghostwatch*'s effects, and its lasting impact, are indebted to the circumstances of that original broadcast, when the line between fact and fiction was intentionally blurred, leaving audiences to question what it was they were really watching.

In fact, it's woven into the story itself. Late in the final act, Dr Lin Pascoe, the broadcast's supernatural expert, realises that the show itself has unwittingly summoned the terrible spectre of Pipes, the malevolent entity haunting the girls of Foxhill Drive. "We've created a seance," she says, "a massive seance. Don't you see?" At a certain point in the drama, the audience, willing something to happen, for Pipes to materialise, becomes complicit with the horror that befalls the production.

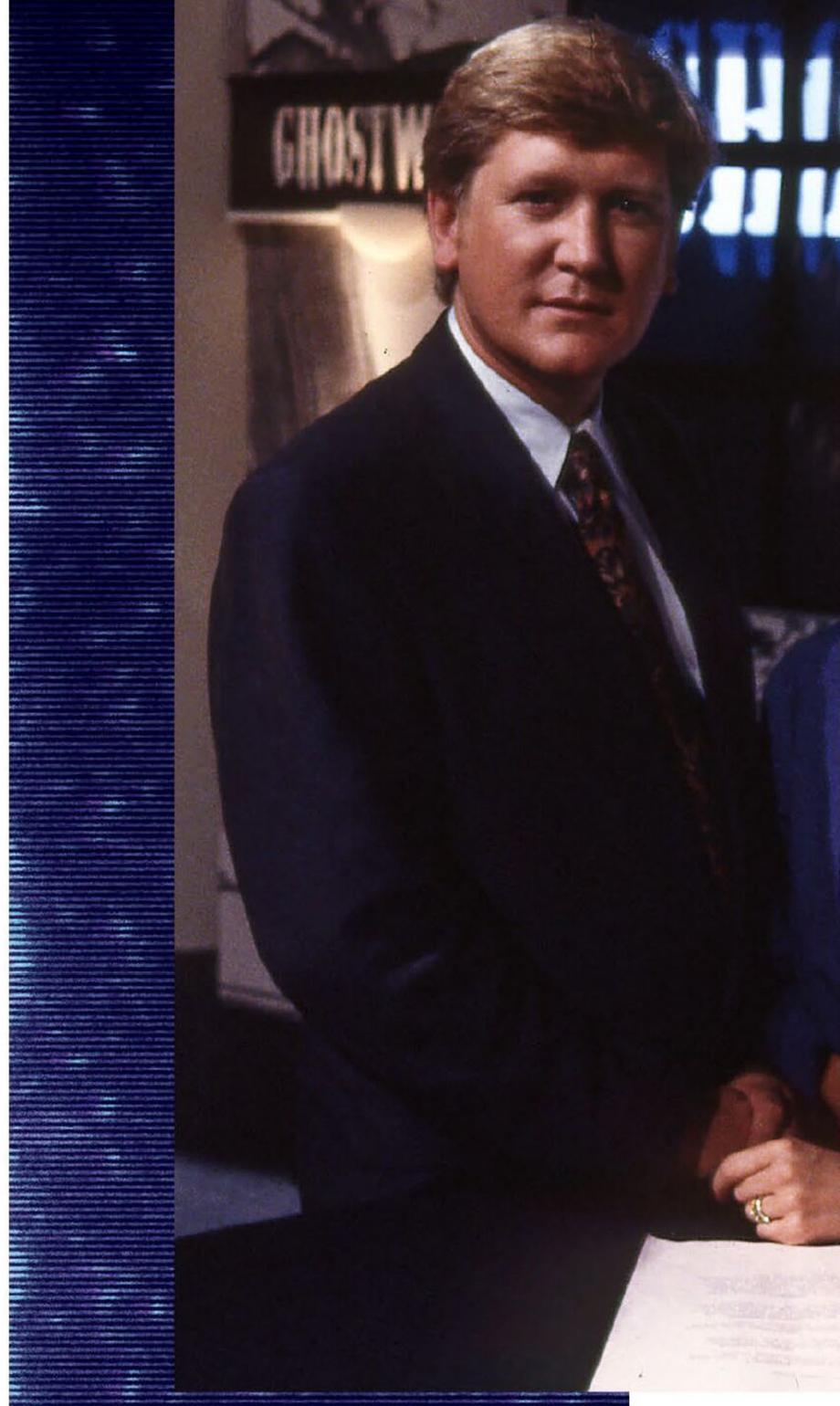
Lawden's father, a sceptic, could see the "wires" – that Parky was acting, that it was all pre-recorded, that it had been written – but his mother was less sure. Sat between them, a seven-year-old Rich was terrified. "I was really quite upset by it, though not initially. It was maybe a week or two later the nightmares came, not wanting to go near curtains – absurd, silly things like that. Nobody at school had seen it. I don't recall anybody talking about it... And all the way up to college, I carried this fear with me. I still have nightmares."

It wasn't until years later, encouraged by his grandmother, that Lawden was able to take control of his fear. "It was the mentality of my grandmother, who insisted on watching our long-play recording. We had one of the rare off-air recordings of *Ghostwatch* that, of course, I chucked into the loft, never to be watched again until it was discovered many years later. She insisted on watching it with me. 'You've got to confront this. You can't let it control you.'" Since then, Lawden has compulsively explored the production, eventually producing his *Ghostwatch: Behind The Curtains* documentary.

Lawden was fortunate, or perhaps unfortunate, depending on your perspective, to experience *Ghostwatch* "live" on Halloween night, 1992 – because if you weren't among the 11.07 million people who tuned in that evening, it wasn't easy to watch it for yourself. In fact, *Ghostwatch* disappeared for over a decade.

The BBC has never repeated the programme on any of its channels or made it available to stream on iPlayer. In fact, it rarely acknowledges its existence. This is likely due to the public reaction and tabloid scrutiny the show received following its initial transmission. The number of complaints varies wildly, with estimates ranging between 835 and a million.

Even to this day, the BBC remains worried about its power. "It's as cautious about the potential effects of *Ghostwatch* today as it was in '92 after they were hauled over the coals," Lawden explains. "So even though it's a 12 in the UK, I have known screenings where they have read a disclaimer ahead of the showing, to have







On The Night includes the original Ceefax subtitles.



Mike Smith, Sarah Greene and Michael Parkinson.

“All the way up to college, I carried this fear with me. I still have nightmares”

an imposed age limit of 18 that trumps the BBFC, and to say, ‘If anybody suffers from a nervous disposition, please leave the room.’”

Ironically, the BBC’s quiet suppression of the programme only fuelled its reputation over the next 10 years, with many assuming the programme had been banned. But *Ghostwatch* was never banned. It was simply never repeated. Today a rip of a VHS or a DVD would be instantly uploaded and circulated, but back in 1992 it was still possible for a piece of media to disappear. Inevitably an underground market emerged dealing in illicit copies. There were rumours of tapes going for £50. Like the cursed videocassette in *Ring*, copies of *Ghostwatch* circulated, taken from off-air recordings that had been gathering dust in attics and garages across the country. It’s easy to see how this only added to the experience and enhanced the show’s already-sensational reputation.

Today you can buy a copy of *Ghostwatch* easily enough, but in *Ghostwatch: On The Night*, Lawden has assembled what sounds like the best way of recreating what it was like to watch that original transmission. “There’s no point calling this *On The Night* unless it’s on the night,” says Lawden. “So we’ve got the BBC intro continuity with the Lambie-Nairn BBC One globe. Mark Waddington was the continuity announcer that night, but I’m sure it would have been worded by Editorial Policy. The BBC wrote this very, very carefully-worded introduction. It wasn’t ‘Next on One, it’s Parky and things going bump in the night with *Ghostwatch*...’ It was almost like a little mini-dissertation for whatever reason. I don’t know why they did it, but again, it’s very evocative. So I said, ‘I want that. I want the BBC *Screen One* ident, lose seven frames of that, so the audio overlaps, just as it did on the night.’”

TEXT ADDICT

Speaking to Lawden you hear the loving fanaticism driving him, the desire to get this just right, and the attention to detail that is present across this special edition. But perhaps that is best illustrated by its unique approach to rendering subtitles. They’re exactly as they would have appeared on Ceefax back in 1992 – not a recreation, but the exact ones.

“There’s this chap called Jason Robertson,” explains Lawden, “who’s known as the ‘teletext archaeologist’. I was very keen that the subtitle track for *Ghostwatch* on our Blu-ray resembled the classic Ceefax formatting. He said, ‘I’ve been working on Ceefax and Teletext extraction methods, and there’s actually a way of extracting baked-in subtitles from a VHS tape.’ Well, I’ve got a tape of it. My old man taped it, and he said, ‘Send it to me, and we’ll see.’”

So Lawden sent Robertson his original off-air recording of *Ghostwatch*, the very copy that his grandmother urged him to watch to overcome his fear. Robertson delved into the cassette and, even though they weren’t visible, he was able to extract some of the Ceefax subtitles submerged below the surface of the magnetic tape. Unfortunately, some of the code was broken and the subtitles incomplete. But Lawden was able to source another off-air recording of *Ghostwatch*. The two combined yielded a full set of Ceefax subtitles that were broadcast on the night.

“We were able to get every single line, and the formatting of these subtitles was so specific and so unsettling. I’ve never seen subtitles that look the way Pipes’s dialogue looks, and I’m not going to say more to that...”

Excavating the tape of those off-air recordings yielded more discoveries, too. “We’re also able to determine that *Ghostwatch* actually went out at 9.28, because it’s not just the subtitles – it’s teletext. So you’ve got the teletext pages on VHS as well. So we know that even though *Ghostwatch* was billed to go out at 9.25, in fact, it went out three minutes later. They pushed it as far as they possibly could in the scheduling.” There’s something incredibly fitting about those illicit, off-air recordings – responsible for maintaining *Ghostwatch*’s presence for over a decade, stoking its reputation – contributing so greatly to this special edition.

What Lawden has assembled reminds you of the kind of special editions released during the heyday of the DVD market. “The first DVD that I ever put into a player was *Terminator 2: The Special Edition*, which is absolutely phenomenal. There’s a lot of Easter eggs, which I think is a lost art.” Lawden finds a lot of modern Blu-rays to be bland, transactional affairs, with the special features little more than an afterthought. “It’s a bit like when you go to the supermarket and do self-service, you know? Please take your items. Please take your items. Get out. And it’s almost like that with Blu-rays. I wanted it to be more personal. The thing with the distributors is they don’t have the time. They’ve got to go through so many titles. But we could focus on this one.”

From the menus resembling a fictional BBC archive system – a little in-universe joke based on the rumour that *Ghostwatch* was locked in the grade one vaults at the BBC following its original transmission – to genuine Easter eggs that need to be discovered for yourself, and a wealth of meaningful special features, headlined by Lawden’s own feature-length documentary, it’s evident that years of work went into this Blu-ray’s creation.

For a long time it wasn’t easy to lay your hands on *Ghostwatch*. This may have inflated its reputation, but rightly so. It is a landmark piece of British television, and thanks to Lawden – and a group of intrepid ghostwatchers – we finally have not only the definitive way of experiencing *Ghostwatch* but of exploring it, too.

Ghostwatch: On The Night is coming to Blu-ray in Australia soon. Visit ghostwatchbtc.com.

PICTURES © BBC. STOCK ART: DA-KUK/GETTY

DESIGNING THE WAR BETWEEN THE LAND AND THE SEA

A CREATURE has been CRUCIFIED in here; hauled up on ropes...
A 6ft-plus BODY. Slightly human face. But with an extended snout. Though somehow elegant at the back of the head, the skull stretching out, backwards, into two long, beautiful fins. The flesh green and scaly. Its clothes - or is it skin? - make it look as though it's swaddled in algae.

Episode one, draft five, scene 20

More colourful concept art for Homo Aqua.

DESIGNING

THE WAR BETWEEN THE LAND AND THE SEA

WE DIVE DEEP INTO THE CREATION OF AQUAKIND WITH THE HELP OF EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JOEL COLLINS, MILLENNIUM FX CEO NEILL GORTON AND PROSTHETIC MAKE-UP SUPERVISOR GEORGIA BROWN – PLUS EXTRACTS FROM RUSSELL T DAVIES'S EPISODE ONE SCRIPT

WORDS **IAN BERRIMAN**

COME TOGETHER

If anyone's well-placed to explain the challenges of creature design, it's *The War Between*'s executive producer Joel Collins. Before moving into producer roles, Collins was a production designer – back in the day, he was behind the look of Marvin the Paranoid Android and the Vogons in the 2005 movie of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*.

"Creatures are one of the hardest things in this industry to get right," he tells *SFX*. "Everybody will have an opinion, and everything you do has a rhythm to the viewer that makes them go, 'That doesn't resonate with me' – you might be on a frequency that makes someone feel it's unreal or weird or funny."

And the challenge can be not only deciding what a creature looks like, but fixing on the best technique to achieve it – something underlined for Collins on Ncuti Gatwa's first season, when the team was tasked with creating the slug-like Mantraps for "Dot And Bubble". "On *Doctor Who*, part of the tone is the physical-type feeling of those creatures – you might lose the feeling of *Doctor Who* by doing it all in VFX," Collins notes. That preference for physical effects saw seven-foot foam-rubber critters appearing on location at the Swansea University campus.



Homo Aqua concept art by Painting Practice.

"We were trying things out, sometimes winning, sometimes not winning," Collins continues. "The Mantrap ended up being replaced in VFX because it was hard to move around – my instinct was, 'Do it in VFX. It's never going to work!' So armed with all the experience of *Doctor Who*, when we kicked into this it was clear we needed to try to have as much in-camera as possible, but not waste our time trying to do stuff that's just not going to work."

The strategy: have the Homo Aqua, the latest iteration of the Sea Devils, as performers in suits and masks; don't worry about giving them mouths capable of delivering dialogue; and leave most of the speaking and emoting to the more humanoid Salt, Gugu Mbatha-Raw's Homo Amphibia spokesperson.

"We made those decisions early on," Collins says. "Which were critical decisions, because it meant that in the design process we were able to develop a creature that could look less like a man in a suit and more like a creature. By not wasting time, effort and money on trying to make it talk in-camera, we were able to know we were investing in doing things like moving the mouth. We replaced the Homo Aqua's face almost entirely for most of the talking on the beach [in episode one], for example – and the blinks. All of that's VFX."

Having everyone – including design studio Painting Practice and Millennium FX, the prosthetics/make-up effects company led by *Who* veteran Neill Gorton – on the same page was key. "It was a really good coming together early on, in agreement that we would not try and do something and fail, we were going to do it the way we were going to do it: just the right things in-camera, just the right approach to VFX, and not figure it out later. A lot of the time you go, 'Let's try and do it in-camera. Let's shoot it, see what it's like,' and then replace it. Whereas I think the VFX team, Neill's team, and the pre-vis and concept design teams worked very closely together, meaning that we could achieve a more sophisticated end result." →

PICTURES © BBC STUDIOS

THE LIFE AQUATIC

Part one of *The War Between* was actually the first thing Russell T Davies wrote on returning to showrun *Doctor Who*. "In the very early days of the [2023] specials, Joel had said to me, 'We've got this somewhere down the line, and it's Sea Devils,'" prosthetic make-up designer Neill Gorton recalls. "Of course I'm going to go 'Ooh!' and start thinking about that! So long before I'd even seen scripts, we did a bit of playing around with ideas of how you would update the Sea Devils. Without a script, you think, 'They're going to be the main character and do all the talking.' So we started doing concepts based on the idea of doing them as prosthetic make-ups. And actually, when the script came in, the Homo Aqua are effectively mute. Suddenly there was no importance on them being able to deliver dialogue. So very quickly that got put aside because the script put a different perspective on things."

RE-MAKE/RE-MODEL

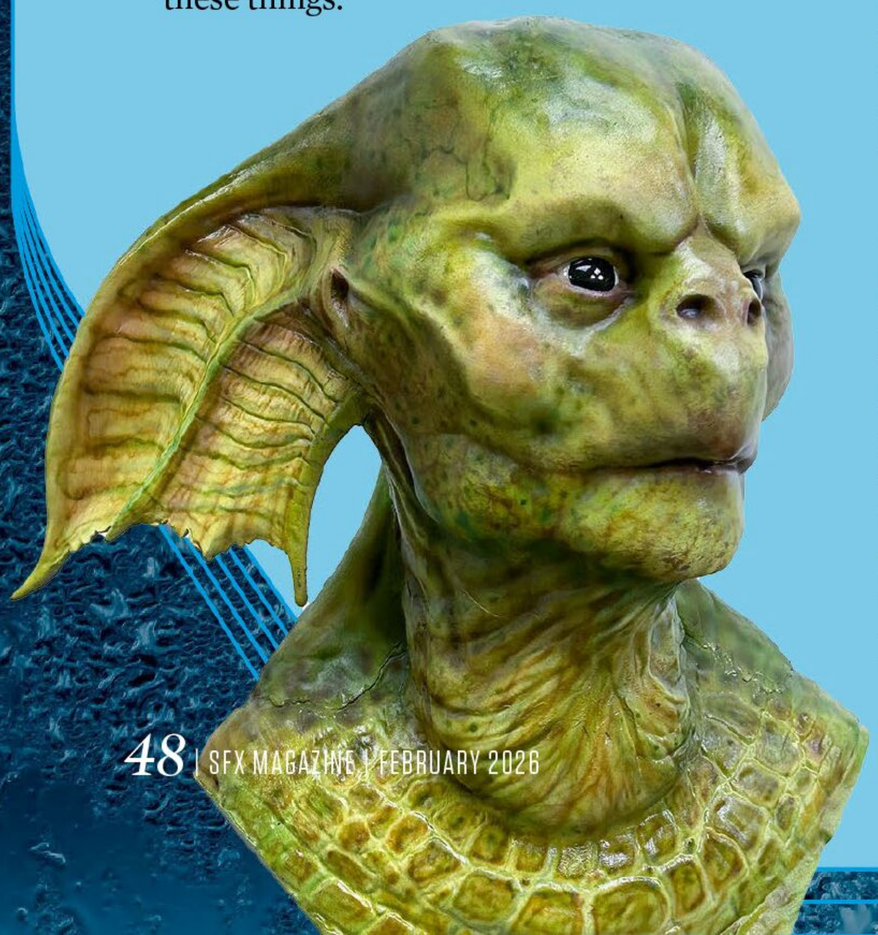
Any production team which dares to put a new spin on a classic monster risks prompting the ire of fans, but Gorton insists it had to be done. "The original Sea Devils are iconic, but they're very grounded in the '70s. Certain design choices – putting the head above the head, the long neck, the string vest – all that is very much of its time. And you've got to make that choice. You either go, 'Actually the original design had something there that's really great, and we want to keep', or 'Look, it just doesn't work anymore' – especially if new audiences are going to be presented with these things.

"We all agreed that they needed a big update, so this very serious drama wouldn't be skewed by having slightly goofy 1970s-looking creatures. So there's a level of seriousness you've got to take with it. You've got to make them feel more real world. You've got to believe these things."



Neill Gorton's sculpts, done before he saw a script.





TURTLE RECALL

The Sea Devils of old (and their landlubber cousins the Silurians) are outliers among classic *Who* monsters, because they're terrestrial creatures. That necessitates a different approach. "You're trying to make them feel organic and real," Gorton says. "They are a prehistoric life form, they're from the Earth. So first of all, you don't want them to feel like alien creatures, because they're not.

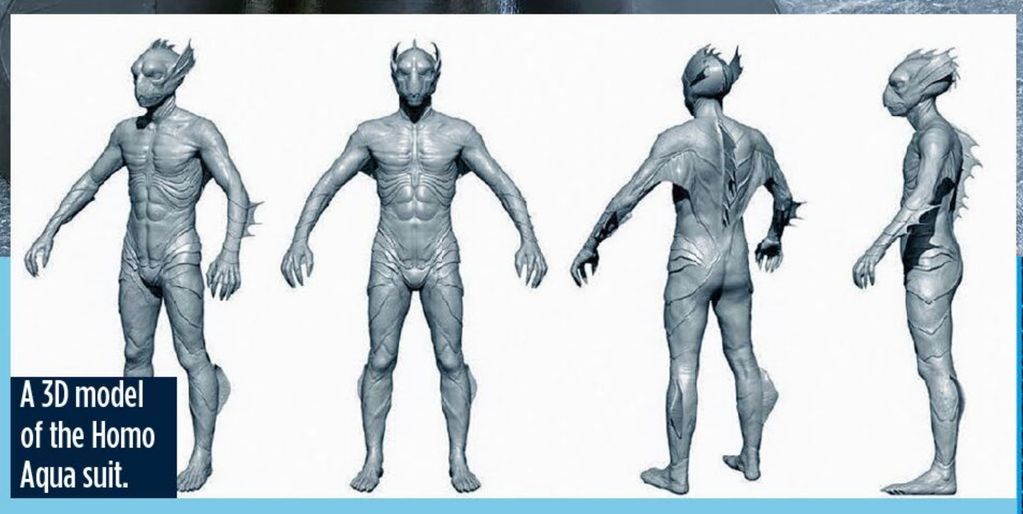
"John Friedlander, who made the originals, was obviously looking at turtles when he was coming up with the face. So you're going to keep a little bit of that in there – the ear fin thing that comes down, the slightly beak-like face, the big eyes. You're looking at what's out there in the sea, looking at nature, and trying to bring some of those elements in, so hopefully you can accept that this is a species that grew up back in the days of the dinosaurs. You've got to feel like this is grounded on this planet and part of this ecosystem."



Homo Aqua suits in the Millennium FX workshop.







A 3D model of the Homo Aqua suit.



The suit was based on a scan of Gethin Alderman.

SUIT YOU, SIR

Millennium FX manufactured numerous foam rubber body suits for the Homo Aqua. "We had several performers, but what we did was build the suits over one performer and cast other performers who were the exact same size. Gethin [Alderman] was our lead, so we designed over him. Basically we do complete body scans, digitally model [the suits], then print that out and move it from digital into physical, and start producing moulds to be able to cast them.

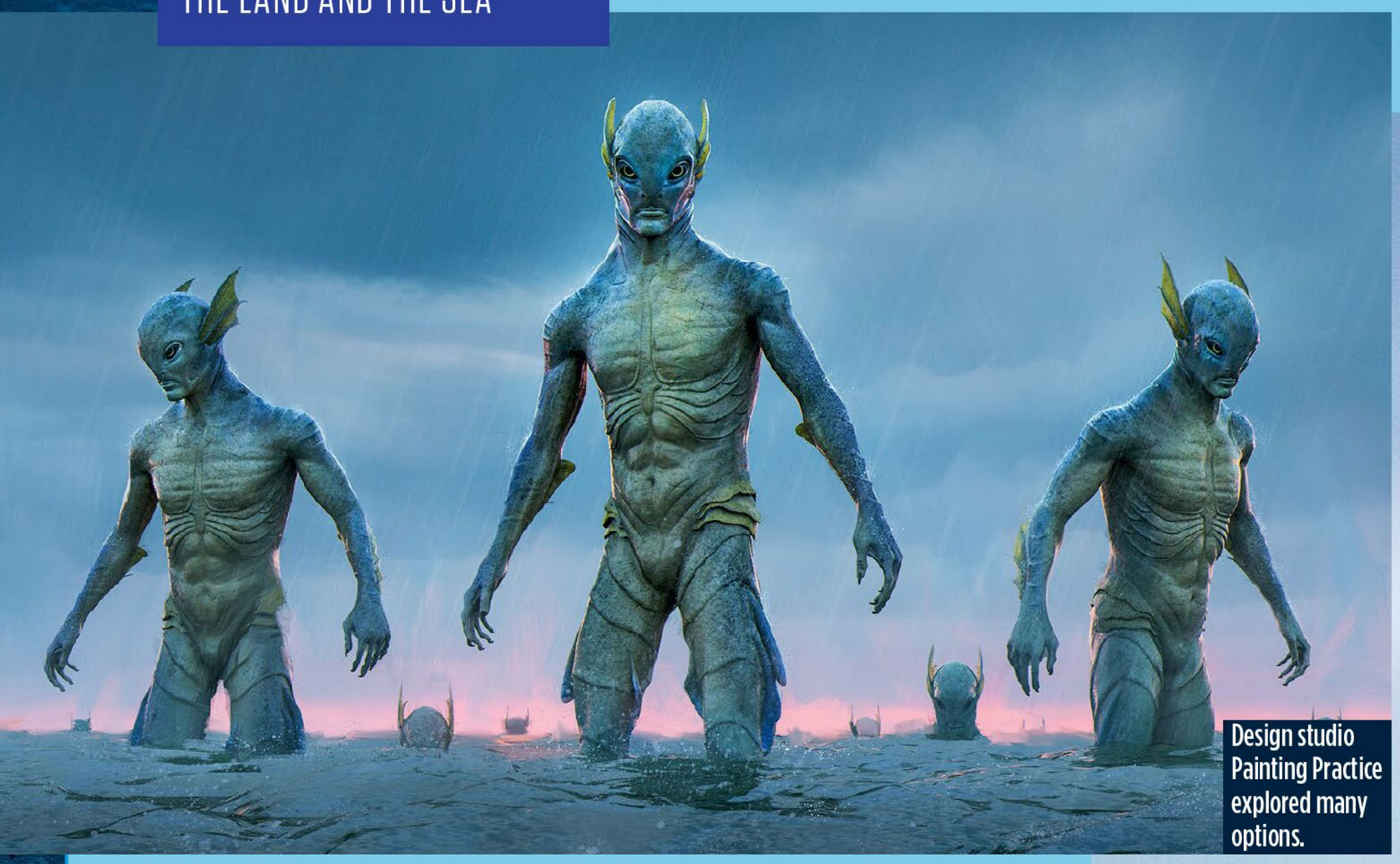
"It's very slim-fitting, so there isn't a lot of mass on them. They're very athletic-feeling, like swimmers – they tend to have broad shoulders, but a very narrow waist. They are an aquatic character, so we went for that physique.

"To be flexible, the foam rubber's got to be very soft, and it's very delicate. So they only survived a certain amount of time, then you'd have to replace them. We had a couple of suits for everybody, so we could do maintenance and rotate them."

PASSING WATER

The fact that the Homo Aqua performers had scenes requiring them to stand about in the sea complicated the construction of their masks, as Gorton explains. "Basically the foam rubber itself is a sponge. If you put someone in the sea in that, it soaks up all the water. If we made it too thick it would get ridiculously heavy. So it all had to be very thin.

"The masks had to be engineered in a way that people could go underwater with them, because if you put that on like a helmet, and try to go underwater, it's an air pocket, so it would just pop off. So they all had to have disguised holes in so that the air could come out, and it could fill up and then drain very quickly when they come up. There was quite a lot of engineering involved in figuring out how to make it go in water and not just swell up." →



Design studio Painting Practice explored many options.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Although maintaining a degree of faithfulness to the ’70s Sea Devils was a pressing concern, that didn’t prevent the production team exploring some stranger avenues – as you can see from the concept art on these pages, the work of design studio Painting Practice. “Let’s just say that there was no stone left unturned,” says Collins. “We tried some really weird and wonderful visual ideas – wacky, mad, crazy, lizard-y, fish-y, shark-y stuff! Ultimately, the thing calling us back was trying to make sure that we didn’t veer too far away from the original.”

Though these more unusual takes were ultimately discounted, the former production designer is a firm believer in the value of the process. “I always used to think that you have no idea if what you’ve done is good if you haven’t really fucked it up already, you know?” Collins laughs. “If you do one idea and go, ‘Let’s do that’, you have no real idea as to whether you’ve missed something or if it’s actually very good. When you’ve tried 100 things, 200 things, and you really like five of them, but you still removed yourself from them and went somewhere else, it means that you’ve critically really tried to pull back.” →



A pointy-headed, more shark-like concept.



Nandor Moldovan was the lead concept artist.

This design looks like it could bite your arm off!

Is anyone else thinking of "Word Up" by Cameo?

Jordan Reynolds was the junior concept artist.

BIG FISH

While Homo Aqua and Homo Amphibia get most of the screen time, in episode one, we also glimpse a third branch of Aquakind. "The Piscimorpha Grandis was very much Russell making a statement that this is not just *them* or *them*, this is a group," Collins explains. "We, the human race, would be like, 'What's next? What else have these guys got up their sleeves?' You don't know whether there's octopus that are part of [Aquakind], you know what I mean? There would be a huge array.

"Basically we took the face of a goldfish and they kind of elongated it. Initially they were like statesmen, but we wanted to make them – excuse my language – really fucking terrifying. Make them look like they're growling or snarling – like, you do *not* want them coming out of the tank. So they went from the concept you have, which is a slightly softer, rounder-faced thing, and we upped the attack dog aspect of them."



A goldfish was the basis for this early concept art.

These fish are roughly the SIZE of a HUMAN, and they adopt a HUMAN STANCE; they swim forward to left and right - further in towards the airlock booth than the two Homo Aqua above, but only 1 metre off the ground. Their heads are literally GOLDFISH in subtler marine colours; the body then curves round and down like a question mark, as though they're standing, the body narrowing into a tail. FIVE FOOT FISH. Staring out. Mouths gulping. They stay in this position, on guard, FINS steadying them.

Episode one, draft five, scene 67



Three types of Aquakind swimming in the tank.

THE SALT PATH

The prosthetics for Salt were slightly simplified during the testing process. “The number of pieces changed,” prosthetic make-up supervisor Georgia Brown reveals. “At one point there was a nose and a chin prosthetic as well, separate appliances, which looked a bit more fantasy. But after we applied the make-up to Gugu for the test, the final look ended up being a back of the head prosthetic with detachable fins in the top and the ears.

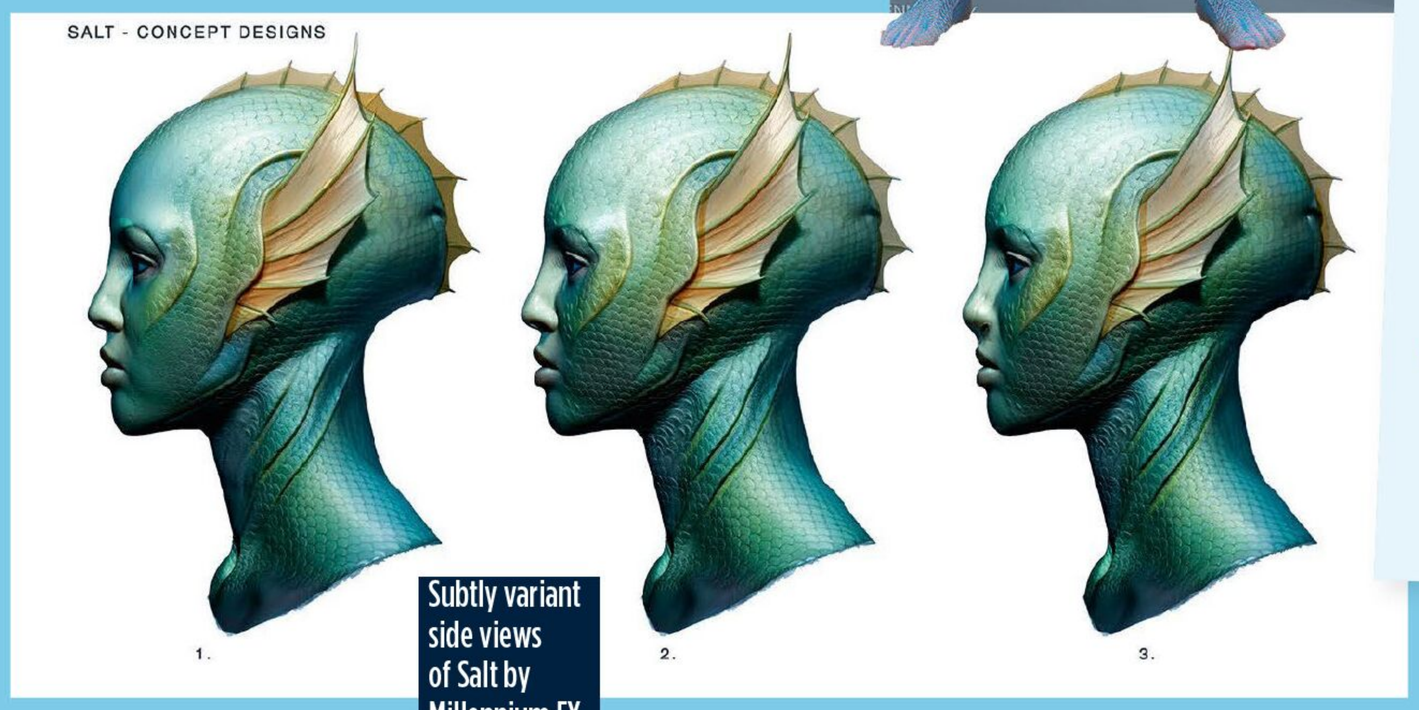
“The detachable fins were a safety measure, and were comfort for Gugu, as her hearing was impaired on set. Often the fins were attached on-set after the rehearsals, so she could go through that before we restricted her. She had a forehead prosthetic as well as cheekbones, jaw corners and a wrap-around neck prosthetic. She also had a silicon suit split into hands, feet, arms, legs, and a foam latex and silicon body armour.

“The layers of costume would have tasked Gugu. The silicon can feel very warm in warm temperatures, but when it gets cold it’s hard to keep it heated up. So on some shoot days we had outside, we had to mind that and make sure Gugu was as warm as possible.” →



A maquette of Salt by Howard Swindell.

Salt colour explorations by Howard Swindell.



Subtly variant side views of Salt by Millennium FX.

She identifies as FEMALE. She is humanoid; VERY human, her skin-scales iridescent, shimmering with all the hues of the oceans. GILLS in her neck. The SKULL-FINS sweeping back. Fringes of FINS along her ARMS. The equivalent of a woman in her 30s; haughty, proud, looking at the room with no fear.

Episode one, draft five, scene 71

COLOUR THEORY

"Colour was a big debate," says Gorton. "With Homo Aqua we were all pretty sure we wanted greenish tones, but with Salt we tried lots of different things: metallic greens, iridescent colours. We were looking at fish and things like that, but a lot of it was very distracting. And as soon as you start getting into more flesh tones, that was too far human. So we went around the houses a lot."

"I was given 3D prints of Gugu's head," adds Brown, "and spent weeks in the workshop coming up with different designs, different patterns, different stages of the test."

"We ended up with basically she's grey with highlights of blue," Gorton says. "The grey was based on the idea that the most evolved aquatic species are things like sharks and dolphins. Also, because it's a very neutral colour, it takes on whatever's around. If you've got warm light, she looks warmer; if you've got cooler light, she looks cooler. So it was felt that gave more choice with the lighting.

"At first I was worried the grey might sap the life out of her. But the lighting really played with that, and managed to convey things about the character through the lighting, through having a more neutral colour."

HERE COMES THE BRAID

How did Millennium FX arrive at the shape of Homo Amphibia's head? As you can see from the images here, it's built up at the back. "You've trying to strike a balance, because you want to make her otherworldly," Gorton explains. "If we'd just done her bald with a few scales, you haven't got different anatomy. Because there's so much dialogue, we needed to leave that middle part of her face as Gugu. But you still need to go, 'Look, she is a completely different species.' So we tapered the head back, and had everything swept back. It looks quite elegant, and it gave us somewhere to put the ear fins.

"Also, Gugu's got quite a lot of hair, so we designed it as a way to hide that. We'd braid her hair and pile it up at the back and make it sit within that, because Gugu wasn't really up for shaving her head!"

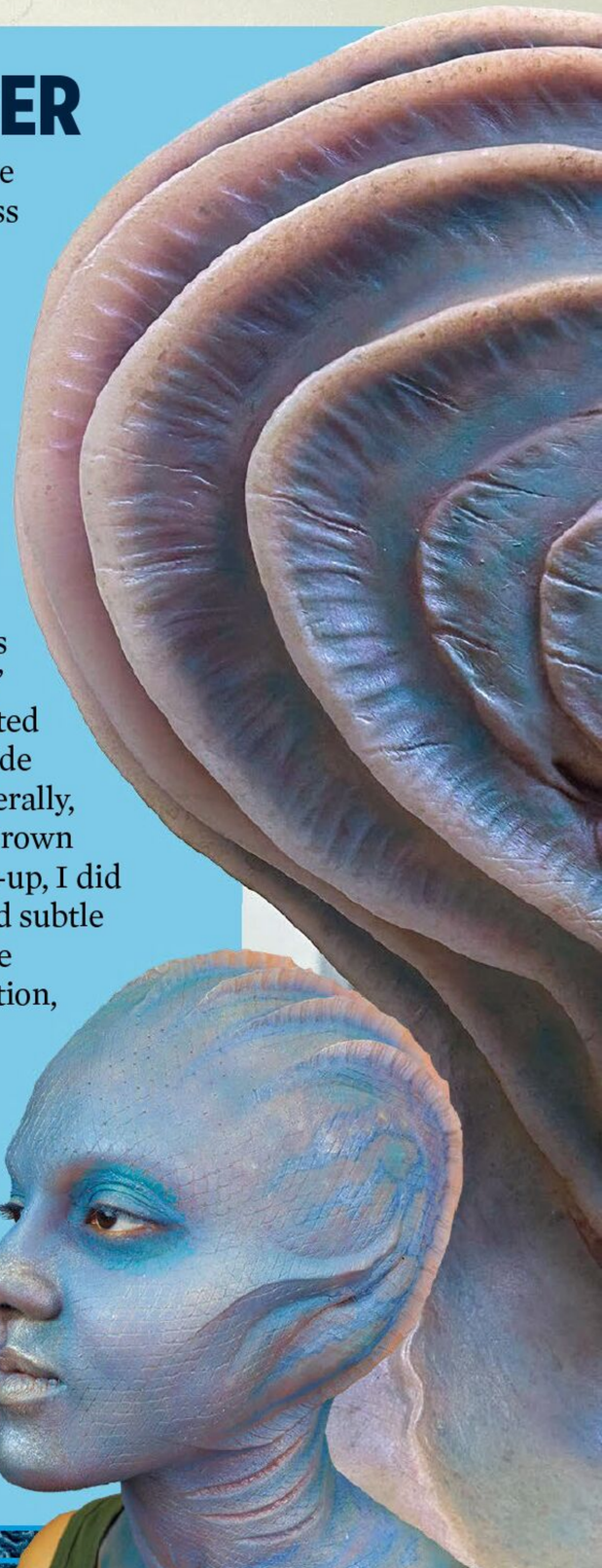


Georgia Brown spent weeks on different looks for Salt.

GENDER BENDER

In episode two, Salt's testosterone spikes as delegates in the Empress Hall anger the Homo Amphibia spokesperson. "We were very eager that the species has a non-gender tone to it," Collins says, "Because they're creatures, and gender is something that we put on people. The feeling of the armour removes a bit of shape from a female form to make her more a warrior and less overtly a shape that you identify."

Different make-up artists created the look of Salt's replacement, Tide (played by Samuel Oatley). "Generally, everything was kept the same," Brown says, but adds, "For Gugu's make-up, I did enhance some areas. So Gugu had subtle eyelashes. She had mascara, some eyeliner – really slight beautification, without it being too feminine. Certain features were brought out, without changing the fact that the species were supposed to be genderless. We wanted her to look powerful, so we didn't want it to look like a beauty make-up."





3D prints were used to try out colour options for Salt.



We reckon this make-up test feels more like a tropical fish!

CLOCKING IN

Over the course of filming, Gugu Mbatha-Raw racked up a *lot* of time in the make-up chair. "It generally took about three hours for the prosthetics and then make-up on top of the prosthetics," Brown explains. "We split that into two sections, just to give Gugu some small breaks in the process. She'd be in hair for 30 minutes before us, an hour and a half of prosthetics, a break, another hour and a half of prosthetics, then usually rehearsals, and then dressing for 25 minutes. So it was a real process that she went through every day.

"Gugu was so kind and so patient. And Sam Di Giuseppe assisted me with my make-up throughout, and she was brilliant. She'd do salsa dancing every morning, just to cheer us up whilst we listened to meditation music with Gugu to get us through that first hour and a half of a treacherous three, four o'clock in the morning."



Make-up tests were done on Gugu's double.



The use of iridescent colours was also explored.

DOUBLE TALK

On many days, the Millennium FX team actually had *two* Salts to prep – Mbatha-Raw, and Christina Cameron, her double. "It was purely for schedule, because if Gugu's going to be in the chair for three hours, you're not getting a lot of filming time," Gorton explains. "[Christina] could either be ready first, so if they're doing an over-the-shoulder she can stand in while Gugu is getting finished. Or the reverse: Gugu would start first, then the double would be used for anything non-speaking – wider stuff, background, where you're just catching a little bit."

"I think in the end Christina was in every day that Gugu was there", Brown adds. "Then Gugu might have one day on, one day off, instead of being in consecutively. We were really mindful of Gugu's time in the make-up, so the best measures were taken so that Gugu didn't have to do it on repeat every single day."

The War Between The Land And The Sea is available to watch on iPlayer now, with a Blu-ray and DVD release due on 23 February.



DESIGNING STRANGER THINGS

COSTUME DESIGNER AMY PARRIS AND PRODUCTION DESIGNER CHRIS TRUJILLO TALK SFX THROUGH THE LOOK OF THE FINAL SEASON

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) and Will (Noah Schnapp).



Eleven's (Millie Bobby Brown) clothes had to be practical.

STRANGER THINGS

ELEVEN

Amy Parris: I have to consider the shoot going the entire year in Atlanta, Georgia, where the hots and colds are extreme. I know these actors are going to be wearing these outfits all season, and Millie [Bobby Brown] in particular has a lot of physical activity indoors and outdoors. I had to think of an outfit that would keep her warm but not be too hot, and that is a very hard balance. It has to be comfortable. So the sweats were really important. The shoes were custom-made by Nike and they are a recreation of an '87. They are high and help protect her ankle when she's running. Then the T-shirt with the sweatshirt on top, it's layers that are comfortable, but not too hot, and they'll keep her warm. Then I did that pop of the red shorts, a nod to Josh Brolin in *The Goonies*. I loved that. She doesn't have anyone to guide her for fashion; it's purely functional, yet very '80s. I needed to make sure the actor was comfortable, but she also looks badass while training.

HOPPER

AP: Hopper has this badass, underground look, ready for his battle moment. That whole tough '80s jacket. He is the most transformed of any character, because if you see him in season one as Hopper, the sheriff, following the rules, following the law, now he's this militia man that's ready to kick ass.

HOLLY

AP: The nice thing about the Duffer Brothers is they're so collaborative. So for Holly, it's scripted as a blue dress. I knew I wanted to print the fabric to have its own pattern, because I know how many multiples we have to make, and '50s fabric is so hard to find. We had the flowers with the roses, but I had a little pinafore that was white, and she suddenly started to look like Alice in Wonderland. It was completely subconscious. So instead of the white base of the dress, we made it light blue, and I showed it to the brothers and they were happy. They were like, 'It doesn't have to be blue; it says it in the script, but it doesn't have to be.' I was like, 'It's best being blue.' →



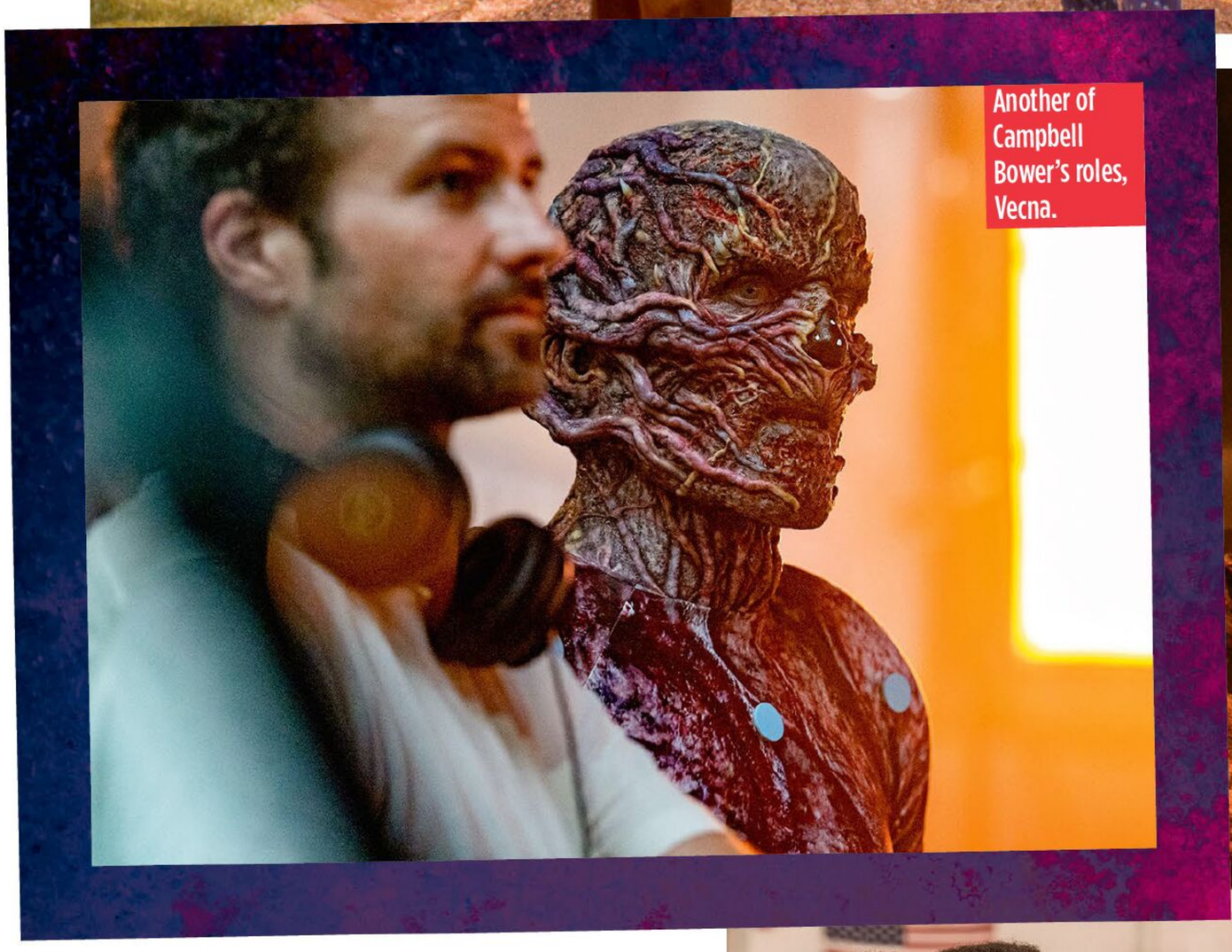
Jamie Campbell Bower plays Mr Whatsit.

MR WHATSIT

AP: It's very iconic, I hope. Our inspiration was a little bit of [US pre-school TV host] Mr Rogers, like he's meant to present so friendly to these children, because these children need to find him warm and comforting, so I went with the brown tones. I also connected that to early Brenner in season four, when we see Dr Brenner in brown suits in the '70s. I definitely feel like there's some kind of Stockholm Syndrome there, where Henry would have felt that connection to Dr Brenner. The red tie is a little shock of red, a danger moment. This show is designed as an ensemble, so I knew Holly would be in the blue dress with the yellow cape, and then Henry was going to be in a brown suit with the shock of red, and then Max would have her own group of colours. Knowing those three would be together, I wanted that bright red. He's got some red socks as well. He's meant to be a calm, friendly '50s man that the kids feel like they can trust. And then it gets more distressed as the season goes on.

VECNA

AP: Prosthetic and makeup designer Barrie Gower designed Vecna's look. The suit, instead of being a typical grey mocap suit with the dots, they screen-printed a Vecna suit with the vines already on the suit. We helped Barrie put lifts in the shoes to make him taller. This was great for Jamie [Campbell Bower] because he wanted to feel even more powerful, because his Vecna look has become even more menacing. We put padding under the suit, like muscles, so that the gait of his walk would be more menacing. He just feels bigger. We helped the special effects team by putting blue dots with velcro onto the suit, because it needs to be cleaned, right? When we need to take the suit off to clean, we take the velcro dots off and then put them on before filming.



Another of Campbell Bower's roles, Vecna.



CREATING MULTIPLES

AP: The characters are in the same clothes for most of the season, so my baseline is creating six multiples of each costume, which feels like nothing. Imagine you've got an actor, you've got a photo double, and you've got a stunt double. You've got a clean one for each of them, and then a dirty one for each. There could be blood or guts all over them. So baseline is six, and if I don't have enough fabric for six, we don't even really consider it. I'm thinking about Nancy's jeans, which were made for us and we asked for 15 multiples. There is an outfit at the end of the season that Eleven is wearing that I asked for 20 multiples of. It seemed so much, but I was like, "Let's just do it, just in case." And we used almost all of them.

DUSTIN

AP: Dustin's wearing rings because Eddie had rings last time we saw him. The trench coat, the hair is longer, the hat is dark, it doesn't have a catchy slogan, he's got his Reeboks, but now they're black instead of white. He's in mourning. It's a sad outfit, because he's still wearing Hellfire. He also has this red sweatshirt, which he has to put on because his shirt has been ripped, and I knew that would pop in the Upside Down. A red sweatshirt in the '80s was such an iconic look for film and TV. It felt perfect for Dustin to carry that. We really dialled into his darkness.

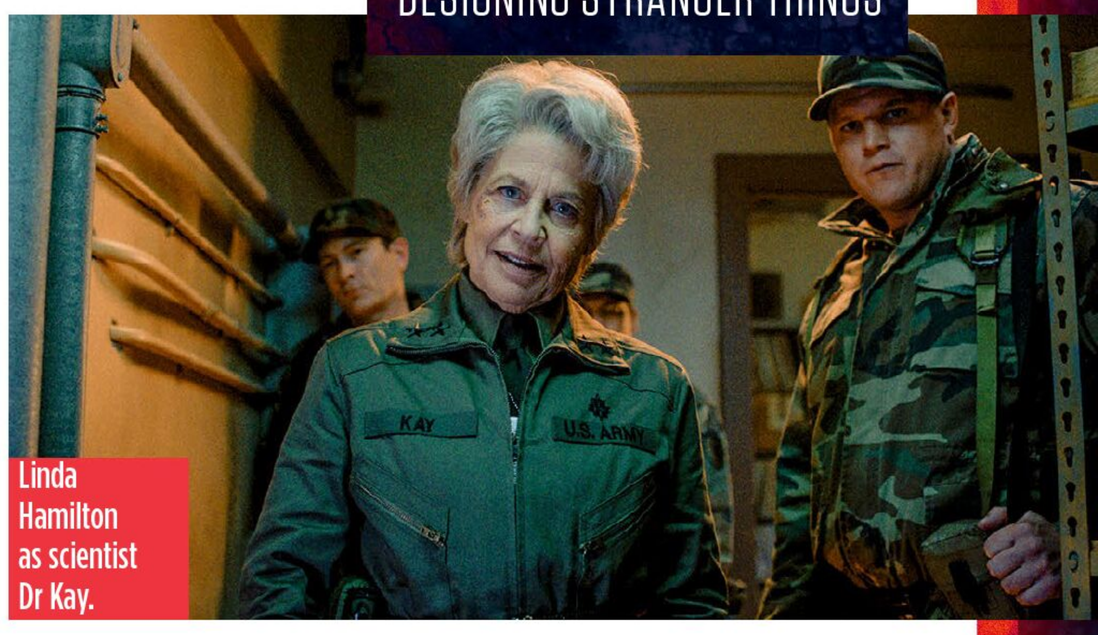


Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) in his Hellfire Club T-shirt.





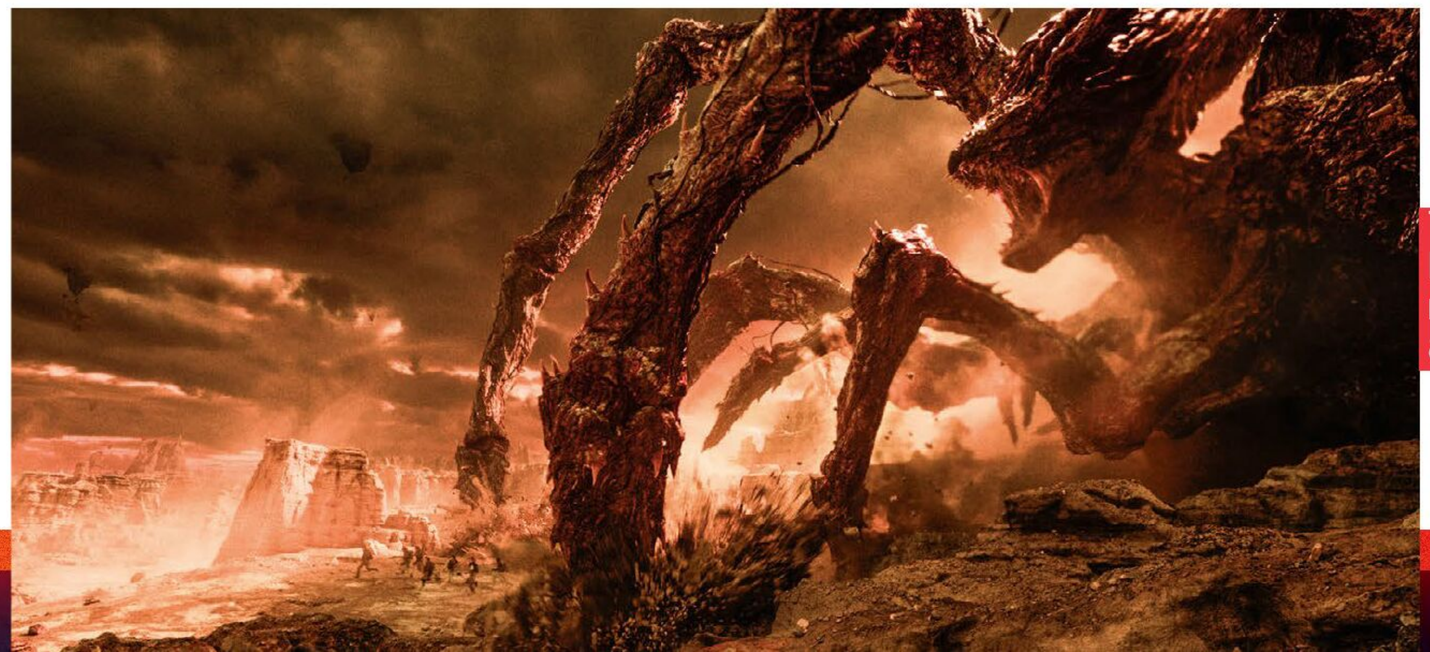
Maya Hawke and Joe Keery between filming.



Linda Hamilton as scientist Dr Kay.



The interior of the Pain Tree was a huge, detailed set.



The Mind Flayer revealed in all its glory.

DR KAY

AP: We really wanted it to feel like she's the boss. Because she's in the military, we gave her this flight suit, and then we put a dress shirt with a tie under it. It looked super cool, super tough, super authoritative. Linda Hamilton's such a dream to work with. She walked right into it. There wasn't a lot of back and forth. It was one fitting, one check fit, and then she wears that for the rest of the season. We got very lucky.

ROBIN AND STEVE

AP: There's no mall in Hawkins this season, so there are subtle differences in the silhouettes of characters. With Steve, he's got those big sleeves that he can push up. It was really cool. Maya [Hawke] wanted to pay homage to Winona. We had this beautiful outfit planned, and last minute she goes, "Can we change it to a Tom Waits shirt with a leather jacket and jeans, like this picture of Winona?" The shirt was later than the show takes place, so I couldn't use that exact shirt, because that picture of him happened later. But we did our own version of it: a different Tom Waits shirt, a different leather jacket and jeans. So that was fun to play with.

CREATING SETS

Chris Trujillo: There was this exponential growth between seasons. The intentions and the story itself just grew into this sprawling beast, and the size of everything that we were doing, be it the sets, the effects, it has grown. Season four, we were all over the place – we were shooting in different places in the world, the storylines were spread out geographically a lot more. That was a really unique challenge in itself. But this time, everything coalesced back in Hawkins, and we were really entering new territory in terms of creating these big, abstract, organic sets. We built the lab, we built downtown Hawkins, this military zone and the gate. That was a huge undertaking.

THE PAIN TREE

CT: The interior of [Vecna's lair] The Pain Tree is in the alternate dimension [The Abyss]. The finale business was a really huge set, unlike anything. It was this giant, entirely carved set that was like being inside of a big, organic monster. So that was enormous and very, very new and different. It's this space which is not the Upside Down, it's not Hawkins, it's truly another dimension. →



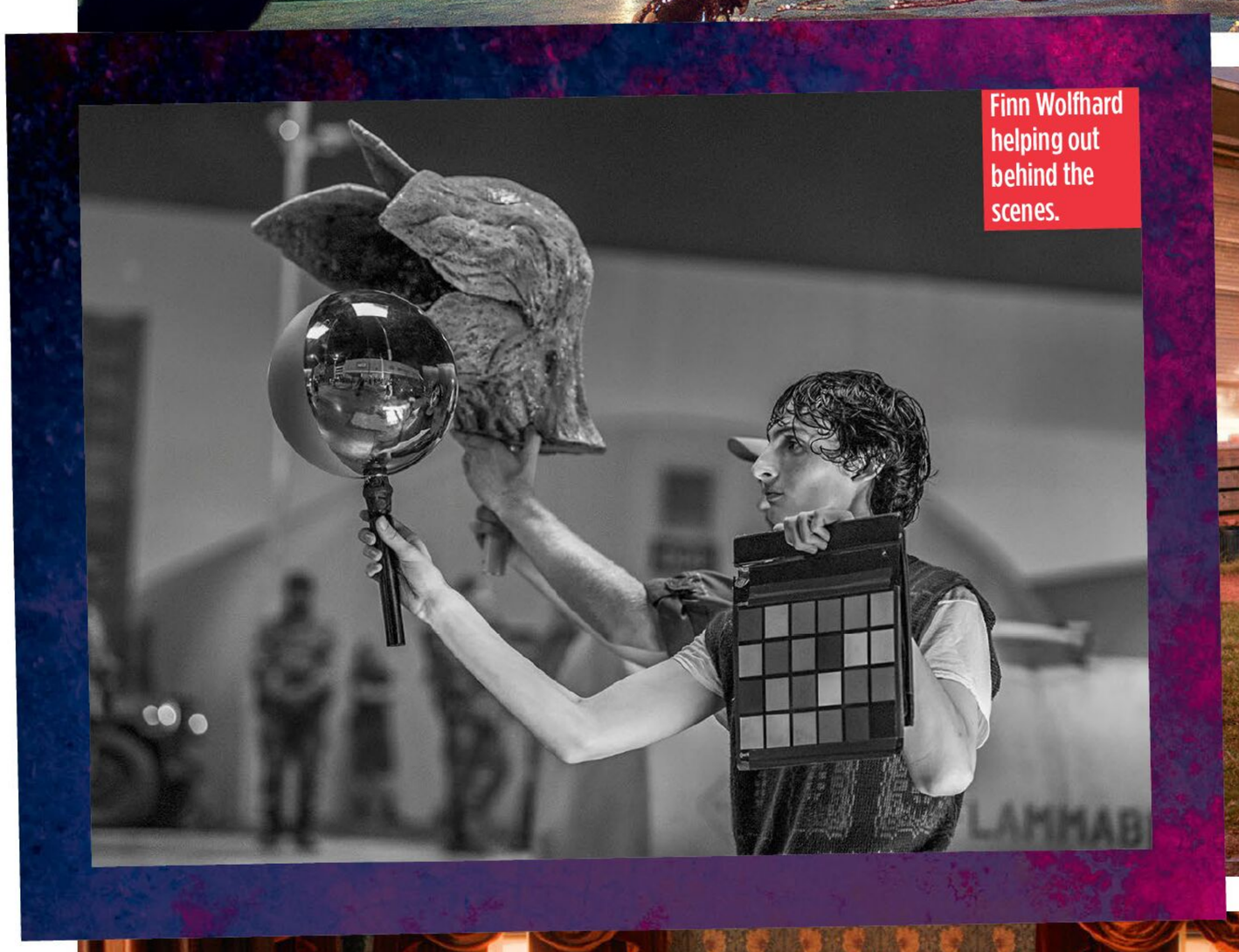
Soldiers are no match for Vecna's Demogorgons.

HAWKINS MILITARY ZONE

CT: The intention was always to give the filmmakers as much of the world as possible so that they could move freely around. They had 360 degrees of world to shoot in, and we wanted to give them unimpeded camera movement options from the first sets we created. As the show got bigger, the set-pieces got more elaborate, and we were still operating with that ethos. It was tricky with the military compound, because it was just a massive backlot build. We were very deliberate in the way we designed all that, because we were really trying to make sure that the camera could move anywhere, and there was lots of space for all this action. We knew the Demogorgons were attacking and there would be gunfire and dozens of actors. We knew that it needed to be a really big playground. We chose to recreate the entire town square, but we had the benefit of being able to contain the set with these walls that the military constructed, which gave us some relief. We weren't building blocks and blocks of the town, but we were able to believably contain it in a script-appropriate way. The only visual effects extensions in that set were above the fence line.

THE UPSIDE DOWN BASE

CT: When we were doing the Upside Down base, we were calling it the Moon Base when we were building it and conceptualising it. That was on a stage, so we designed all the interior stuff. When we were doing exteriors, whenever we saw vehicles arriving there and a bit of Eleven infiltrating, we built the necessary bits and pieces to get the interactions we needed with the characters. There was a lot of VFX extension to create the larger zoom-out, when you're seeing the base in the context of the Upside Down. We were able to do it on stage partly because we're in the Upside Down and everything is dark. That one was awesome and very forgiving, because we're in the gloomy, dark world of the Upside Down.



Finn Wolfhard helping out behind the scenes.



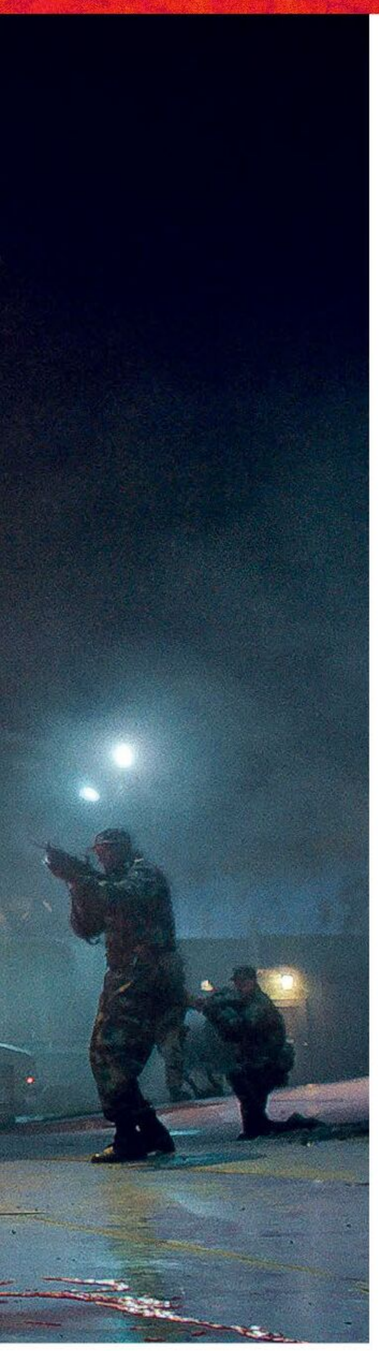
THE CREEL HOUSEHOLD

CT: We were kind of revisiting familiar spaces as we had seen the Creel house, but we had several iterations of it. We wanted it to feel like we were seeing it through this fairy-tale Technicolor lens. We wanted to embrace these Technicolor tones and give it a sheen of pleasant unreality, unsettling and dream-like. Like a dream, it all feels unrealistically happy and colourful and it's very much a counterpoint to a lot of what goes on in our show, which tends more towards this dark, grim realism in places. The fantasy elements tend to be more horror-toned. It's very distinctly apart from everything else.



At first, Mr Whatsit seems to be helping the children.

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The melty-looking Hawkins National Lab.



Chris Trujillo's favourite real-world set, the radio tower.



Holly and Max prepare to jump into a new memory.

THE RADIO TOWER

CT: That one was really special. It's funny because I get so preoccupied with the fantasy and the more outlandish stuff, but frankly, that was probably my favourite – certainly my favourite real-world set. We knew that it was going to be central, both visually and to the plot, but also to our gang. It's where they plot and plan. There's always some version of that, like in season one, the basement. As I was putting the lookbook together for season five, there was so much amazing visual information about radio stations from that era and the '30s and '40s, when radio was really booming. There are a lot of great art deco-style radio buildings, and it was exciting to justify that style on the show. One of my favourite references in the lookbook was this radio station in North Carolina. I sent the Duffer Brothers the book, and they're like, "Oh, we were talking about this particular radio station. This image is the radio station from our childhood that we would see driving around as kids. This is literally the actual station that we had in mind." That little bit of serendipity led me to get in touch with the radio station, which was still operational. They invited us out, and we spent a couple of hours running around, measuring, surveying and photographing. That experience ultimately led to the set that we built. We took our cues very directly and very specifically from that radio station. We also recreated 65 feet of the radio tower structure in steel, which was then architecturally sound and climbable. To the Duffers' credit, if we're building a set and it's feeling like it's even better than we thought it was going to be, they will subsequently write to the set to make sure. Like, "Let's get it on camera more!" They will rearrange scripted action to make the most of sets. And that was one of those.

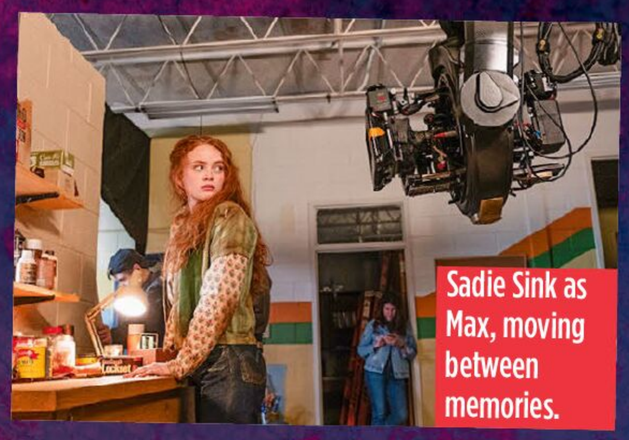
SCULPTING THE UPSIDE DOWN

CT: The melted Hawkins' lab, we literally created this method of designing these practical sets that look like the physical world is melting. It's all really big, elaborate sculptural work with incredible scenic work on top of it. Similar to that, in terms of the sculptural approach, was the giant meat wall – that's what we called it – surrounding the Upside Down. We had to figure out how to physically build chunks of it. Then the interior of The Pain Tree, which is essentially inside the belly of this giant beast, which was a very new thing. The whole set was essentially a giant sculpture to create the sense of being inside an organic creature, inside the chest cavity, and that required a whole new level of sculpture that we had never really needed before.

Stranger Things is on Netflix.

MAKING CAMAZOTZ

CT: There are all of these really fun, weird interactive ways Max enters from one memory into another, but also simultaneously, there are some very scary bits, like breaking through a mirror from one memory space into another. At one point we are going through the forest and arriving at this incongruous rocky outcropping, then suddenly you're in the desert, and then you go through that, and now you're in the cave. All of that interconnectivity, for me, was really exciting, because you seldom get to marry one set to another in this very unique and dream-like way. There was so much to sink your teeth into.



Sadie Sink as Max, moving between memories.



Inside the Pain Tree is mostly built of foam on metal.





PULP SCIENCE FICTION

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER ITS RELEASE, DIRECTOR ROGER CHRISTIAN EXPLAINS WHY HIS L RON HUBBARD ADAPTATION BATTLEFIELD EARTH ISN'T THE MISFIRE ITS REPUTATION SUGGESTS

WORDS: OLIVER PFEIFFER

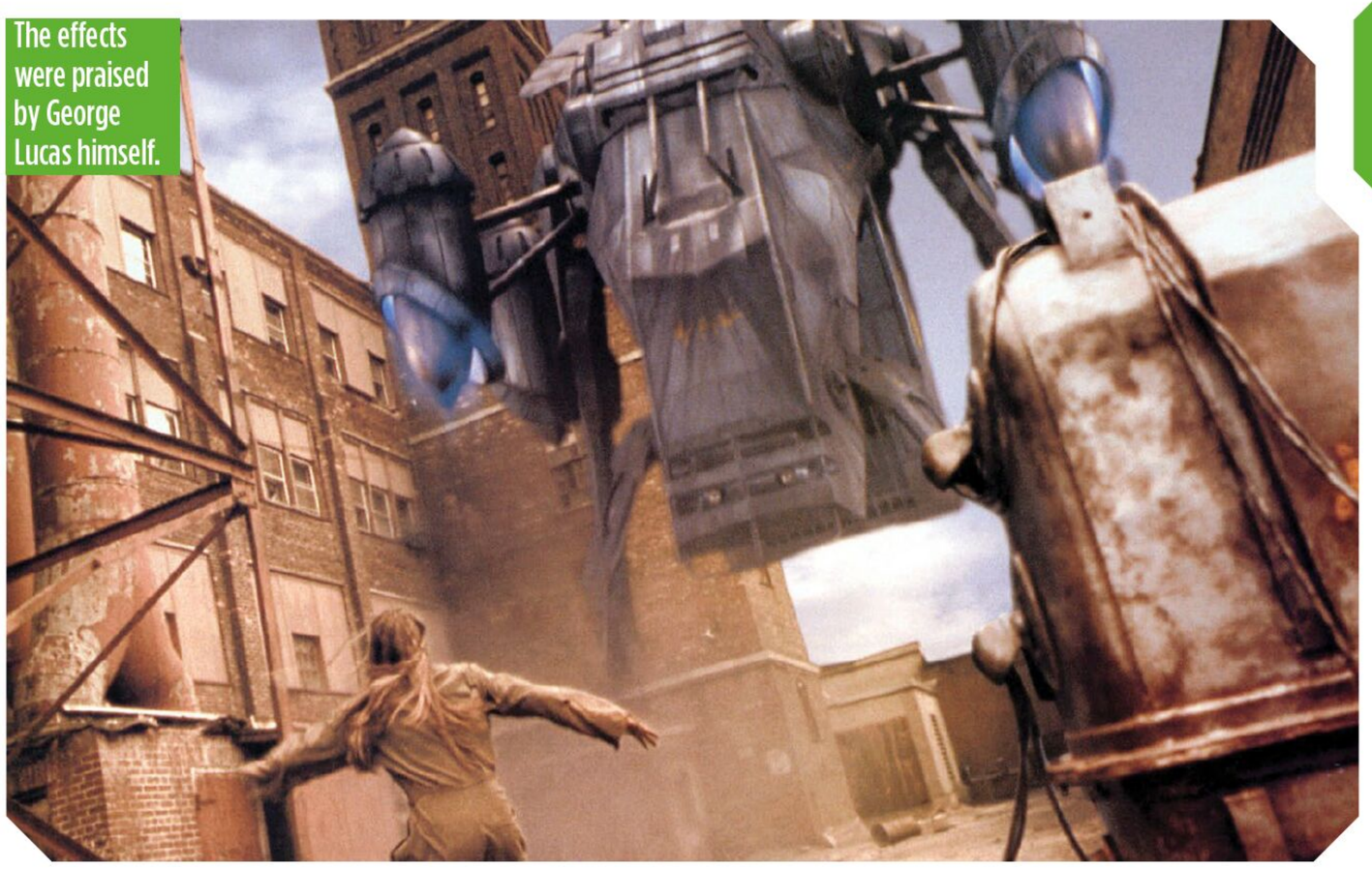
"THE FIRST TRAILER FOR THE *Phantom Menace* was playing, and by chance, half of the shots in it I'd shot as second unit director. John Travolta had seen it, set up a dinner meeting with me, and said, 'Look, I've got to make *Battlefield Earth*. I'm going to do it now, and I'm not doing another film until I make it, and you're going to have to do it!'" Roger Christian tells *SFX* regarding the moment he was approached by the actor to direct an adaptation of pulp science fiction author (and Scientology founder) L Ron Hubbard's mammoth 1982 novel.

Set in 3000 AD, on a post-apocalyptic Earth ruled by the towering, dreadlocked, gold-hungry alien race the Psychlos, *Battlefield Earth* tells the story of how the now-enslaved human race, led by Jonnie Goodboy Tyler, launches a revolt to reclaim their planet.

Christian, the Oscar-winning set decorator on the original *Star Wars* and production designer on *Alien*, who had also directed several films, was personally recommended by George Lucas. "I loved the book; it's one of the great science fiction books," he continues. "So they explained to me then that [they] had called George Lucas, and at that time, there was only $9 million to make this film, and they asked him, 'Could Roger do it?' George replied, 'He's probably the *only* person who could do it for you on that budget.'"

MALL RIGHTS

Indeed, in addition to his directorial credentials, Christian had an uncanny ability to literally turn trash into cinematic gold, having built Luke's original lightsaber, the Millennium Falcon and the Nostromo spacecraft from scrap parts on the original *Star Wars* and *Alien* films respectively, lending them their iconic, lived-in aesthetics. He had a similarly cost-effective approach for *Battlefield Earth*. "It was incredibly cheap; no one made a film like that in Montreal, they made art films before that. We found so much production value for so [little]. We built a miniature ILM in an old, →

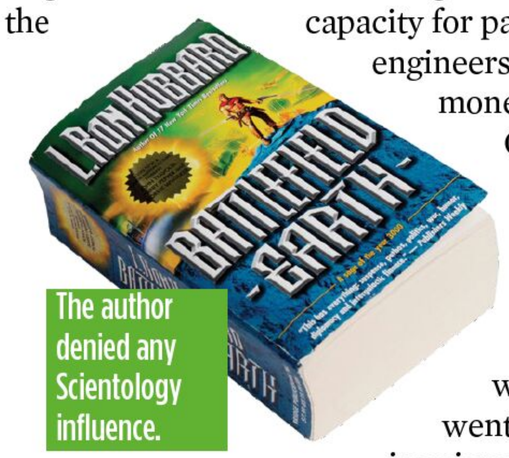

The effects were praised by George Lucas himself.

empty military base, and I brought over the brilliant model maker Bill Pearson, who worked on *Alien*, and he trained up an entire crew and did everything for us."

Serendipitously, an abandoned shopping mall, scheduled for demolition, was discovered and turned out to be perfect for the post-apocalyptic production. "Don Carmody, our producer, had to wrestle the [owners] who had bought it for $5 million and were going to tear it down, and I pleaded with him that we needed it, as it had massive production value. So they agreed that we could shoot in there for a week," continues Christian. "It just shows what you can do with a limited budget. Making *Star Wars*, and particularly working with George, I garnered a lot of experience about how to get production value on a big scale."

Visual effects were handled by the then-budding company Hybride, which has since become a renowned powerhouse, contributing to the distinctive world-building of *Sin City*, *Avatar* and *The Mandalorian*. "We started working with Hybride because the CGI expert had left a major company in Montreal to join this small new studio," he explains. "We followed the artist, not the company. We gave them 84 shots, and that launched them. They're now one of the biggest players in the world."


About 20 model makers worked on the film.



The author denied any Scientology influence.

In addition to being a co-producer, John Travolta portrayed prime Psychlo antagonist Terl, a wisecracking, high-ranking security chief. Despite a theatrical performance, it remained true to Hubbard's original prose, which depicted the alien race as towering, backstabbing brutes devoid of empathy or the capacity for pain. "The Psychlos are the engineers of the gold, and believe that money is all that matters," explains Christian. "One distributor said to me, 'Well, you've kind of attacked the psychology of America. Don't forget this land was originally lived in by Indigenous Indians, and within a few years, that all went away. In came all the immigrants, and they just took over and started building cities, and all that natural world they'd lived in disappeared. But that mirrored what Hubbard wrote, showing the organic natural world, how it could be destroyed, and how it took heroes to lead it out – it's the same story as *Star Wars*."

TAKE IT TO CHURCH

Contrary to popular belief, despite the assumed associations with high-profile members like Hubbard and Travolta, Christian says there was no interference from the Church of Scientology on *Battlefield Earth*.

"John Travolta was really careful not to. In fact, Mark Isham, a major film composer, sent me a demo piece, which was amazing, and I said


Barry Pepper as Jonnie Goodboy Tyler.



RETURN TO SENDER

How Quentin Tarantino's admiration for Roger Christian's sci-fi horror debut helped secure him the director's chair on Battlefield Earth

"I was on a press tour in Atlanta late at night with John Travolta, and we were sitting having a chat quietly on our own, and he said, 'It was great, thank goodness for Quentin Tarantino recommending you!' And I said, 'What are you talking about John?' He said, 'You know, Quentin?' and I said, 'No, I've never met him. I know who he is.' John replied, 'Every director I came up with, I would first call Quentin, and he said, 'No, no, no,' and when I mentioned your name, he said, 'Yes! He's the director you've got to hire!' So he said, 'My jet is going back to LA and Quentin is on the jet, and I'm going to put you on the jet with him.'

"Tarantino told me how *The Sender* was his favourite film of that year [1982], and he was reciting scenes from it and said, 'You know, I worked in the video store back then, and I took people every night to the cinema because I realised the studios were not supporting [the film]. Then I recorded it off TV.' However, when the film came to his rental store, he noticed they'd cut some scenes out, so he said, 'On my own money, I went to a little video editing house, and I put [those scenes] back in, and that's what we rented to people!'"



Forest Whitaker (left) is Teri's underling Ker.

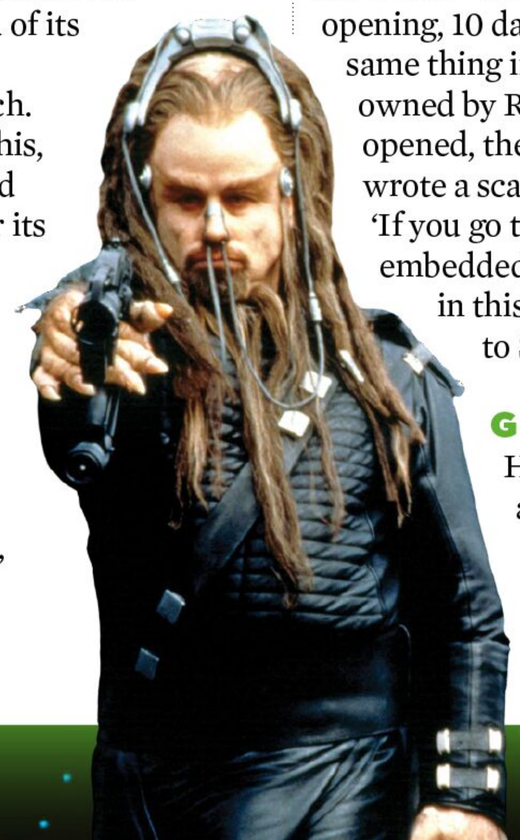


Travolta (right) asked Christian to direct.

to John, 'You've got to listen to this!' and he said, 'You can't use him! He's a Scientologist. I can't have any more on the crew – it's already going to be a target," he reveals. "That's how careful he was to not have this in any way labelled. In the [foreword] of the book, Hubbard himself says, 'I'm sure everyone is going to be disappointed in this and wonder why I wasn't dealing with my serious work. I just wanted to go back and write a rip-roaring science fiction adventure again.' So, even he [confirmed] it had nothing to do with it, and the film has nothing to do with it either."

Despite these claims, the film faced considerable backlash ahead of its release due to perceived connotations with the Church. Christian says that prior to this, *Battlefield Earth* had received exceptionally high scores for its trailer, which helped secure strong pre-bookings.

"Everything was going well, but [Tim Burton's] *Planet Of The Apes*, which was being released by Fox, was getting really bad test scores. Then, disaster struck,



> **"I just wanted to go back and write a rip-roaring science fiction adventure"**

and Sky dumped a huge campaign into the press saying, '[*Battlefield Earth*] is a Scientology film; you can't go and see it!' And they really ripped hell, and our numbers just fell to the floor!" he continues. "The head of promotions at Warner Bros told me this happened around the world – as soon as they heard the film was opening, 10 days before, they would dump the same thing into all the world's press that was owned by Rupert Murdoch. When it opened, the lead reviewer for the *LA Times* wrote a scathing critique, even claiming: 'If you go to the cinema, the director has embedded various subliminal messages in this film, you will be converted to Scientology!'"

GOING DUTCH

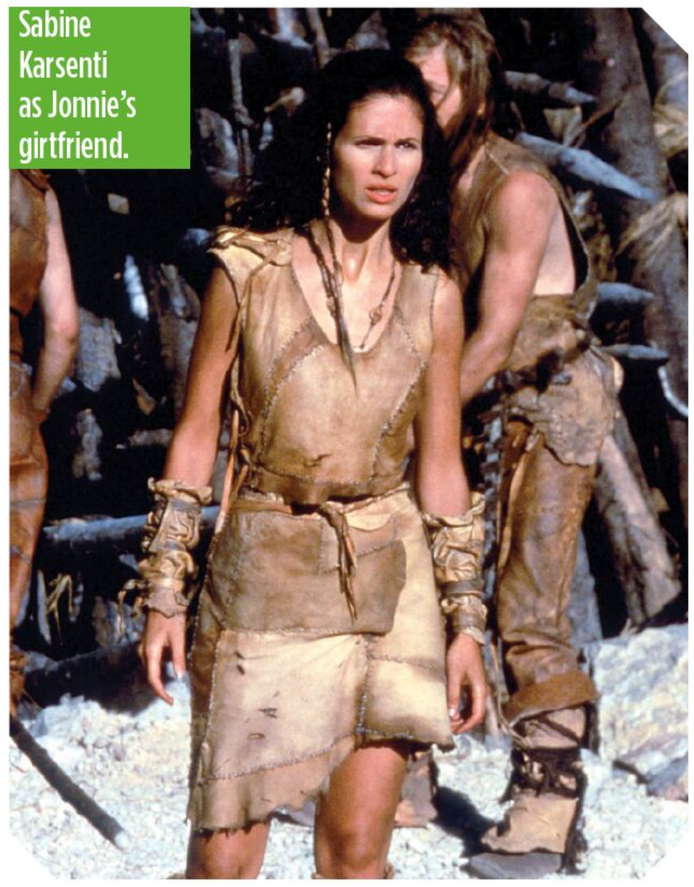
However, some of the backlash also stemmed from specific artistic choices. For instance, the film's heavy use of angled shots drew criticism at the time, but Christian explains this was both a stylistic nod to pulp comic fiction and a practical decision. "We wanted to make a graphic novel kind of movie, and that's why we dutched shots to look like that," he says. "Also the Psychlos were very tall, and it meant that we could frame everybody into those shots and make it work. Would I do that again? I don't know. That seems to be what a lot of people attack and say I didn't know what I was doing, but it was intentional."

Although the film was initially met with critical derision, the director defends its tone and artistic choices, claiming that several notable filmmakers praised the work. "We wanted it to be kind of light; it was half comedic, half science fiction and action, and no one seemed to get it because it wasn't supported at all by the studios and because of the anti-Scientology hatred, especially in America. They just couldn't let it be; it was too much of a combination between the book, Hubbard, and John Travolta," he says.

"However, John and I took it to the [Skywalker] Ranch, and we had a special screening for George Lucas, and at the end he questioned me on everything and said, 'I don't understand how you did it. What was this budget?' and I said, 'In the end it was $44 million, including all the stars' salaries and everything.' George replied, 'I need you to tell me how you did this. I don't understand how you got this type of screen value with the special effects.'"

Quentin Tarantino also praised the film after seeing it at the Los Angeles premiere. "He sat between John and I, and at the end stood up and said, 'I love this film!' He hugged John and hugged me and said, 'Listen, they're not going to get it for 20 years. Just love this film and forget about it, it's gonna come back later, you'll see! I want to make films like this... I just can't do it!'"

Battlefield Earth is on Blu-ray.



Sabine Karsenti as Jonnie's girtfriend.

Brought To Book

THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW

ALIYA WHITELEY

Of wars and words: the BSFA Award winner tells us about her new novel

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Sebastian Lister

WHEN SHE SETS OUT TO WRITE A NEW novel, Aliya Whiteley embarks with a sense of optimism. Here is a chance to escape into another time and place, as with her forthcoming novel *The Misheard World*. "For me, it was about the nature of stories and how that changes how we feel about our own lives," she says. "I was interested in the difference between the act of telling the story and what it means to listen, and the gap that lies between those two things."

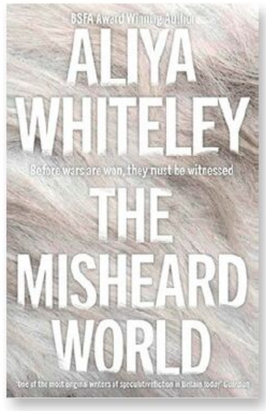
In our current era of polarised political debates, when the ability to use stories to connect with supporters and voters is so important, this seems a highly charged theme. Especially at a time when so many of these stories are loaded and slanted, or just plain untrue. Whiteley looks resigned to discussing this topic. The real world, she says, usually intrudes in her work. "You find out you've just created a place where, in some ways, it makes it easier to identify some of the problems with the world that you live in," she says. "So I don't think there is an escape – I think everything I write comes back to being political in one form or another. But I do like the opening chapters when I first start and I think that maybe I've escaped, for a little while at least."

Whatever her intentions, Whiteley's remarkable fiction has been appreciatively received in recent years. She has twice made the Clarke Award shortlist, for *The Loosening Skin* (2018) and *Skyward Inn* (2021). Meanwhile, her 2024 book *Three Eight One*, about a 24th-century curator stumbling across a story posted online in the summer of 2024, took the BSFA gong for Best Novel.

SILENT WITNESS

All this means *The Misheard World* is keenly anticipated. And it doesn't disappoint. The book centres on soldier and prison guard Elize Janview, who's assigned to pay witness when haughty and highborn Allynx Syld interrogates a trickster spy, Marius Mondegreen. It's a book about glamour and people who have the power to dazzle others, and about how a longing for revenge can shape us. But narratives, especially during wartime, are rarely as straightforward as we may wish them to be.

"The things Janview hears, and the stories the spy and his interrogator tell, make her realise that all the things she thinks about her world and the war are not exactly as they seem," the author says. There's something of Iain M Banks's *Use Of Weapons* about the novel, the sense of different tales spiralling together, and as a reader never quite being sure what's going on. "I'm happy with that!" Whiteley says.



BIODATA

From
Barnstaple, Devon

Greatest Hits
As well as her fiction, including *Three Eight One* (2024), Whiteley is an acclaimed writer of non-fiction. Her *The Secret Life Of Fungi: Discoveries From A Hidden World* was published in 2020. She writes a non-fiction column for *Interzone*.

Random Fact
As a child, Whiteley loved *2000 AD*. Encountering Alan Moore's "The Ballad Of Halo Jones" was a formative experience, as was reading Octavia E Butler and Ursula K Le Guin.

How did Whiteley reach a point where she was able to conjure up such narratives? To understand, it helps to head for Ilfracombe, the seaside town on the North Devon coast where she was raised. While it's been gentrified in recent years, in the '80s, "it did feel very bleak and sinister and odd at times". She remembers working as a chambermaid in a "crumbling Victorian hotel" where everything was damp. People arrived expecting sunshine and instead had to endure Atlantic weather systems making landfall.

Whiteley left Devon to study theatre at university in Aberystwyth. "I realised I really didn't want to be an actress or involved at a practical level in the theatre," she says. "My tutor at the time said, 'Well, why don't you try creative writing?' And as soon as I started I just thought, 'This is what I want to do.'"

LOSING THE PLOT

At first she wrote for the theatre, but shifted into novels and short stories. Her first two novels were published by Macmillan at a time when the company was running a new writers initiative "where they took unagented writers and just kind of threw the books out there". Both *Three Things About Me* (2006) and *Light Reading* (2008) were crime tales set in a locale not unlike Ilfracombe.

But creatively, Whiteley was already moving on. "I was thinking, 'I don't think I'm a great fit for crime, particularly in the way I work,'" she says. "I would create a crime and then have no idea who did it or why. I don't know if many crime novelists work like that – I think probably not!"

Worried about attempting long-form speculative fiction, she began writing SFF short stories instead. "I sent them out randomly to magazines and publications, and *Strange Horizons* took one," she says. "I thought, 'I'm at least in the right area here.'" She was headed in a new direction, a decision confirmed when the small press Unsung Stories picked up her folk horror novella *The Beauty* (2014). Her career has subsequently blossomed.

As to what Whiteley will do next, she's not sure. She's researching a book that "feels quite heavily influenced by [philosophical novelist] Iris Murdoch". But she never really knows what will happen until she begins writing her first draft, which she always does with pen and paper. "If I write straight to computer, it loses something," she says. "I'd be hard-pressed to say what, but maybe it's a lyrical quality."

Sometimes, as Whiteley's career proves, taking the long way down your own path pays dividends in the end.

The Misheard World is out on 26 February, published by Solaris.



> “If I write straight to computer, it loses something”

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28 YEARS LATER: THE BONE TEMPLE

Will the Jimmies give you the willies?

Highlights



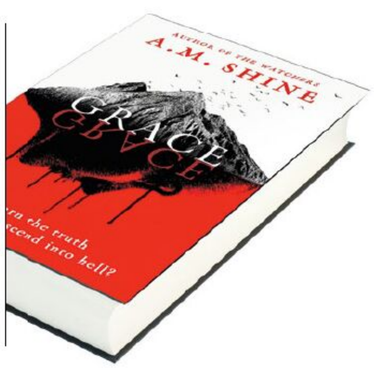
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We didn't anticipate Voldemort's shirtless look.

28 YEARS LATER: THE BONE TEMPLE

The Crystal Method

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 109 minutes

Director **Nia DaCosta**

Cast **Ralph Fiennes, Jack O'Connell, Alfie Williams, Chi Lewis-Parry, Erin Kellyman**

Shot back to back with *28 Years Later*, and kicking off a couple of days after its climax, *The Bone Temple* expands the world with a mix of cynicism and beauty that makes for an existential horror that's not exactly scary, but is at times profound, led by superb performances from its returning cast. Mind you, when was the last time a zombie movie was truly scary? *28 Days Later* perhaps... but with Alex Garland on script duties and Danny Boyle as producer, this remains a sophisticated, satisfying horror that packs a punch.

Outside of the crazed, gnashing Infected, the biggest threat now comes from Jack O'Connell as "Lord Sir Jimmy Crystal", a self-appointed cult leader who we first met in *28 Years Later* as the little boy let down by his fanatical minister father. His band of "Jimmies", styled after Jimmy Savile, are cruel vigilante Satanists who have forcibly co-opted Spike (Alfie Williams) into their gang after a brutal battle in an abandoned swimming pool. Like *28 Years Later*, *Bone Temple* plays with misremembered nostalgia – where *Teletubbies* is the height of innocence and the Jimmies dole out their twisted take on "charity".

> **"Not exactly scary, but is at times profound"**

On the other side is Dr Ian Kelson (Ralph Fiennes), an atheist who believes "it's just us" – humanity is the cause and solution to everything. A former GP, latterly preserver of the dead, alone in his ossuary but for the tenuous friendship he builds with Infected "Alpha" Samson (Chi Lewis-Parry), for Kelson life is short, lonely, but not meaningless.

Taking the reins from Danny Boyle is director Nia DaCosta, hot off the back of *The Marvels*, *Candyman* and *Hedda*, who worked closely with Boyle on *The Bone Temple*. DaCosta has been a fan of *28 Days Later* since childhood, and *28 Years Later* and *The Bone Temple* fit together perfectly as jigsaw pieces. Though the 36-year-old director is American-born, Garland's script keeps things deliberately British. However, despite references to the Teletubbies, Iron Maiden and Duran Duran, this is still very much DaCosta's own thing.

O'Connell's Crystal is menacing and terrifying, but still human. Fiennes's Kelson is gentle and genial, but pulls off a magnificent set-piece when asked to play the Devil, channeling his inner Voldemort. But a quiet moment of conversation between the two is possibly the most electrifying and charged scene of the entire film. Shout out too to Lewis-Parry, whose hulking Samson plays like Frankenstein's creation in reverse. He brings a strange heart to the film, despite speaking very few words.

And yes, Cillian Murphy is in it, and no, he's not a zombie – no need to keep your eyes peeled. He's set up for a third part that promises great things. **Rosie Fletcher**

i The production designers made their first model of the Bone Temple using wooden skewers bought from a cookware shop.



BULK

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 90 minutes

Director **Ben Wheatley**

Cast **Sam Riley, Alexandra Maria Lara, Noah Taylor, Mark Monero**

If you were concerned that *Kill List* and *A Field In England* director Ben Wheatley had sold out when he directed big budget killer shark flick *Meg 2: The Trench*, then this defiantly home-made thriller should disabuse you of that notion.

BULK is a low-budget science fiction adventure told in a non-linear, non-naturalistic style that aims for maximum confusion – and succeeds. "Narrative is tyranny!" a character declares at one point. Right you are, then.

The story follows freelance journalist Corey Harlan (Sam Riley) as he's abducted by two oddly familiar strangers and forced on a surreal journey through multiple planes of reality. In practice that means a series of genre-blending encounters rendered in the most lo-fi way possible – think *Sapphire & Steel* meets early *2000 AD*, but produced on a budget of about £50. You can't fault the ambition, and indeed, the whole film is a triumph of spit-and-sawdust creativity, with the DIY vibe even extending to revealing in the end credits how certain visual effects were achieved.

It should go without saying that *BULK* is not for everyone. Some – perhaps many – will find the film insufferably indulgent, or "weird for weird's sake". Those that persevere, however, will find a method to the madness, and an ingenious film that rewards multiple viewings. **Will Salmon**



Too late, they realised the party wasn't fancy dress.

100 NIGHTS OF HERO

Cherry picking

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 6 FEBRUARY

15 | 91 minutes

Director **Julia Jackman**

Cast **Emma Corrin, Maika Monroe, Nicholas Galitzine, Amir El-Masry**

Brutally regimented patriarchal societies and the revolutionary power of storytelling, same-sex relationships and gender fluidity all collide in Julia Jackman's whimsical fable, which finds the attention of neglected bride Cherry (*It Follows*' Maika Monroe) torn between the smooth, slinky Manfred (Nicholas Galitzine), trying to seduce anything in sight, and Emma Corrin's dutiful, crafty and narrative-weaving maid Hero.

Set in a fantastical world conjured by a child, but warped by her father (Richard E Grant), *100 Nights Of Hero* has production and costume design to die for,

"A nice line in sly humour and good work from its leads"

a nice line in sly humour, and good work from its leads, but does sometimes fall foul of tones that clash more than complement each other.

Spinning a tale within a tale (Hero tries to distract Manfred from pursuing Cherry via an *Arabian Nights*-style story that features Charli XCX as another young woman facing a troubled marriage), the film can't quite keep a grip on its own narrative, delivering ideas in unsubtle fashion – even if they are painfully relevant to the current climate of books being banned in the US and endless performative panic about sexuality.

Still, there's certainly plenty to like in *100 Nights Of Hero*, not the least of which are the warped mirror it holds up to society, and the charming performance of Corrin in particular, who finds a solid groove as the maid who knows a lot more than she's letting on. It's a movie that has heavy themes but a light touch, even if the two don't always gel as they might. **James White**

i Shooting at historic Knebworth House meant finding ways to work around untouchable real-world art and antiques.



STITCH HEAD

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 13 FEBRUARY

U | 91 minutes

Director **Steve Hudson**

Cast **Asa Butterfield, Joel Fry, Rob Brydon, Alison Steadman**

Adapted from Guy Bass's book series, *Stitch Head* is a cuddly spin on the *Frankenstein* mythos. The titular hero is a mild-mannered cross between the Monster and Igor; created in a castle by the Professor (Rob Brydon), Stitch Head has become the on-boarding guide for all new creatures emerging from the gothic lab.

It's geared towards younger viewers. There's nothing here that will cause sleepless nights, and the central relationship between Stitch Head and the latest creature – called, um, Creature – is sweetly handled. Asa Butterfield (*Ender's Game*) voices the polite patchwork people-pleaser with a timid sweetness, while Joel Fry (*Cruella*) brings a beastly boisterousness to loveable oaf Creature. It's a shame they don't share more screen time, as the *Pinocchio*-esque plot sees Stitch Head joining a travelling freak show in search of the validation he lacks at Castle Grotteskew.

The animation is decent enough, considering this isn't from one of the industry's dominant powerhouses – it's a German-Luxembourgian-Indian-British co-production – and there's some mildly amusing physical comedy. But there's no urgent need to seek this out if you haven't got under-10s to entertain, as it doesn't bring anything overly thrilling or insightful to an evergreen but well-worn sci-fi staple. **Rob James**

Reviews

CINEMA



Giving a whole new meaning to "piggyback".

ANACONDA

Welcome To The Jungle

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 99 minutes

Director **Tom Gormican**

Cast **Paul Rudd, Jack Black, Steve Zahn, Thandiwe Newton**

Back in 1997, the original *Anaconda*'s campy combo of ripe performances, cheesy effects and B-picture plotting was preposterously inept enough to earn it an enthusiastic cult following. Almost 30 years on, this latest take on a giant snake wreaking havoc in the Amazon tries to resuscitate the franchise by amalgamating creature feature horror with knowing meta satire. A mirth-free misfire results.

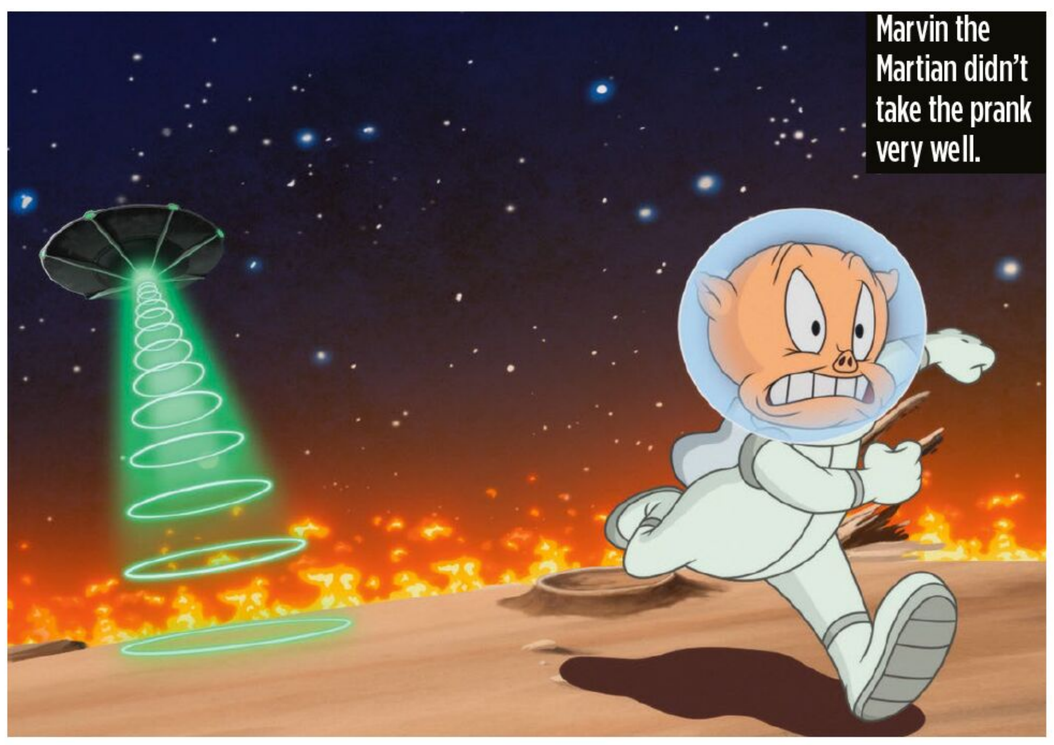
The wobbly plank underpinning Tom Gormican's follow-up to his enjoyable Nicolas Cage vehicle *The Unbearable Weight Of Massive Talent* is that two filmmaker buddies – would-be director Doug (Jack Black) and struggling actor Griff (Paul Rudd) – should hold the original *Anaconda* in such high esteem they would fly to Brazil, charter a boat and risk life and limb rebooting it. It's no surprise that this foolhardy enterprise quickly comes a cropper, or that they soon find themselves being stalked by a genuine monster reptile.

What does astound is how little humour and vigour the film's leads bring to the material, even with the game assistance of Steve Zahn and Thandiwe Newton, and cameos from two of the original's bigger-name stars. Did they sense from the off this was always destined to be a crushing hiss-appointment? **Neil Smith**

i The ending of the film had to be rewritten after an abandoned boatyard set was destroyed by a cyclone.

LOONEY TUNES: THE DAY THE EARTH BLEW UP

The Earth Dies Laughing



Marvin the Martian didn't take the prank very well.

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 13 FEBRUARY

PG | 91 minutes

Director **Peter Browngardt**

Cast **Eric Bauza, Candi Milo, Peter MacNicol, Fred Tatasciore**

In the *Looney Tunes* universe, the world ends not with a bang, but a "That's all folks!" Amazingly *The Day The Earth Blew Up*, released nearly a century after the first *Looney Tunes* short, is the first totally animated, totally original full-length *Looney Tunes* movie ever released. And we very nearly didn't get to see it. Warner Bros Discovery, which had intended to release it on HBO Max, was ready to abandon it as a tax write-off until an independent distributor, Ketchup Entertainment, snapped it up for theatrical release.

So was their investment worth it? Well, *The Day The Earth Blew Up* is no Pixar-challenging animation masterpiece, but it's enjoyable enough lightweight fluff, with a good few moments that genuinely recapture the crazed visual wit of the original shorts. Riffing on B-movies, with an insane plot involving zombies created by alien bubble gum, the film spotlights Daffy Duck and Porky Pig as the unlikely saviours of mankind.

Along the way we have an origin story for Porky's stutter, some porcine love interest, B-movie (and *Armageddon*) Easter eggs, a cheesy message about friendship, some great gags, some rubbish gags, and a couple of jarring gags about Daffy's butt. Daffy has rarely been crazier. Porky has rarely been so annoyingly judgy. With no fewer than 11 credited writers, it very much feels like a "let's throw it all at the wall and see what sticks" confection.

Ultimately, though, it makes you pine for a new series of Daffy and Porky shorts with more gags and less faffing around. **Dave Golder**

i Coffee shop Beans Brew's logo features Beans, a cartoon cat who appeared in nine Warner Bros shorts from 1935-36.



RABBIT TRAP

★★★★☆

RELEASED 30 JANUARY

15 | 88 minutes

Director **Bryn Chainey**

Cast **Rosy McEwen, Dev Patel, Jade Croot**

Bryn Chainey's debut feature is a heady mix of Welsh folklore and experimental music. While much modern folk horror has been content simply to retread tropes pinched from *The Wicker Man*, *Rabbit Trap* feels genuinely distinctive.

Rosy McEwen stars as Daphne Davenport, an avant garde musician who moves, with her sound recordist husband Darcy (Dev Patel), to an isolated cabin in rural Wales. The couple plan to put down some roots and complete Daphne's next album. Their world is shaken, however, when Darcy encounters an unearthly child (Jade Croot), who tells eerie tales of the old ones lurking in the woods.

The film plays out as a restrained three-hander, with a nervy McEwen and an increasingly desperate Patel trying to hold things together as Croot's enigmatic character creeps further into their lives. There are echoes of *Berberian Sound Studio* and *The Shout*, but *Rabbit Trap* is its own intriguing brew of woodsy mystery and psychedelic weirdness.

Admittedly, the '70s setting adds little – the film is so hermetically sealed that the story could have been told equally well in the present – and some will find the ambiguity of its final act frustrating. Those that surrender to *Rabbit Trap*'s poetic sensibility, however, will be rewarded with an unsettling and deeply emotional film.

Will Salmon



"What do you mean by 'Is it safe?'"

MERCY

Trial run

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 100 minutes

Director **Timur Bekmambetov**

Cast **Chris Pratt, Rebecca Ferguson, Kali Reis, Chris Sullivan**

What would it be like in the near future if an advanced AI system served as judge, jury and executioner in murder trials? Something like a mash-up of *Minority Report*, *Memento* and screen-centric mystery *Searching*, if Timur Bekmambetov's disposable but pacy sci-fi thriller is anything to go by.

Mercy puts a techy spin on the single-location thriller, as LAPD detective Chris Raven (Chris Pratt) wakes to find himself strapped into a chair in a newfangled Mercy trial. Accused of killing his wife, he's given 90 minutes – and access to copious digital evidence – to prove his innocence to AI arbiter Judge Maddox (Rebecca Ferguson).

> **"The ticking digital clock is an effective tension-cranker"**

There isn't a critical jury in the land that wouldn't dismiss this as utter hokum, but it's an engaging ride while it lasts. The ticking digital clock is an effective tension-cranker, and any major objections are overruled with the sheer speed at which it barrels along, introducing suspects, red herrings and fresh evidence as Chris races to bring his guilt percentage below the threshold for reasonable doubt. Ferguson, with her pristine features and crisp diction, is effectively chilly as the justice-dispensing avatar, while Pratt – from his seated position – brings the appropriate level of gusto for the unsubtle premise.

There's never any risk of *Mercy* becoming a chamber piece, either, as Maddox's tech provides access to flashbacks, drones and police heli-bikes, and there are a couple of vehicle chases thrown in for good measure. Even the featherweight transparency of the CGI earns leniency from the film's digital-interface framing, resulting in a guilty pleasure verdict.

Matt Maytum

i Pre-superstardom, Chris Pratt had a small role in Bekmambetov's *Wanted*, getting his teeth knocked out with a keyboard.



PRIMATE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 30 JANUARY

18 | 89 minutes

Director **Johannes Roberts**

Cast **Johnny Sequoyah, Jessica Alexander, Troy Kotsur, Miguel Torres Umba**

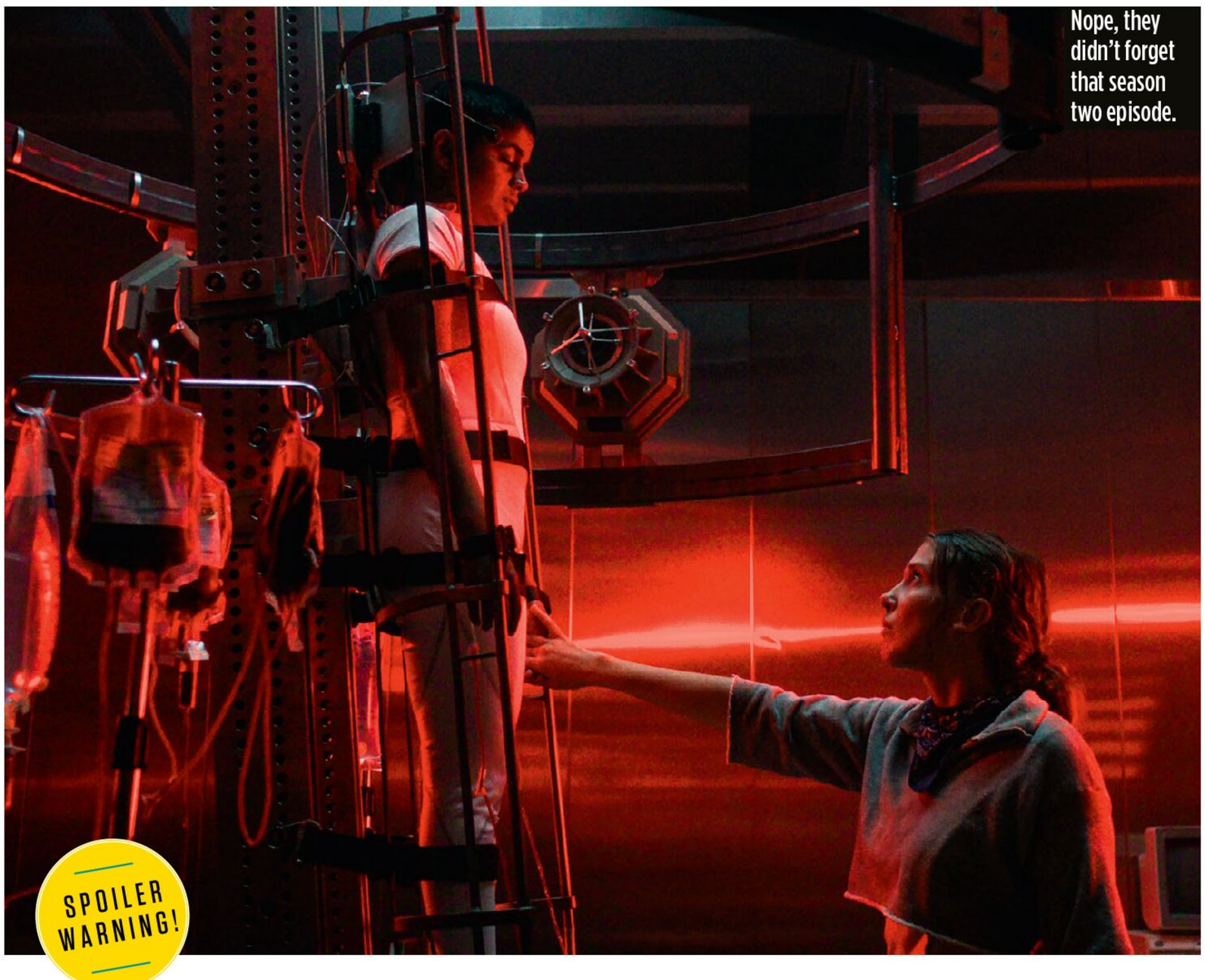
Trouble comes to paradise in the form of a rabid chimp in *Primate*. When Lucy (Johnny Sequoyah) returns to her Hawaiian home with her friends in tow to see her deaf father (*The Mandalorian*'s Troy Kotsur), she finds the domesticated family pet has gone ape.

Rabies (aka hydrophobia) gives room for a neat twist on survival horror. If Ben the chimp is afraid of water, where else to shelter for the group but in a swimming pool? Ben has learned rudimentary language which he expresses via a keyboard too, making him a sinister and unpredictable foe.

This is another strong offering from British director Johannes Roberts, who delivered one of the most tense, economically effective shark movies in recent years, 2017's *47 Meters Down*. *Primate* is equally lean, jumping quickly into the action, and not outstaying its welcome. Sure, the plot is formulaic – this is *Cujo* with an ape – but the characters are likeable, the kills are grimly inventive, and the production values are high.

The real ace up *Primate*'s hairy sleeve is that the effects are practical rather than CGI, with Ben played by actor Miguel Torres Umba in an animatronic suit. An old-school B-movie eco-horror that'll be a sure-fire crowd-pleaser.

Penelope Dee



Nope, they didn't forget that season two episode.

SPOILER WARNING!

STRANGER THINGS Season Five

It's the final countdown

★★★★☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

Creators **The Duffer Brothers**

Cast **Millie Bobby Brown, Sadie Sink, Finn Wolfhard, Gaten Matarazzo, Caleb McLaughlin, Natalia Dyer**

EPISODES 5.01-5.08 **After nine years,** *Stranger Things* comes to an end with a two-hour finale that goes full-on *The Return Of The King* with its post-climax tearful goodbyes. And you know what? If Dustin sticking it to Principal Higgins at Graduation, or the Hellfires passing on the *Dungeons & Dragons* baton to the younger kids, or Mike's theory about Eleven's fate don't have your heart singing as much as Team Hawkins taking hit points off a giant Vecna-spider had your heart beating, then *Stranger Things* really wasn't for you.

Season five has its flaws. Hell, it's arguably the worst season of *Stranger Things*. But that's worst when set against a high bar. While the plotting and resolution of the Vecna story arc has its issues (and a hell of a lot of hand-wavy exposition) and the incessant bickering does become immensely wearying at times (especially in the first batch of season five episodes, with Dustin in a perma-strop), there are plenty of high points, with the show firing on all cylinders: the Turnbow trap sequence and Will telekinetically ripping a Demogorgon to shreds are up there with any of the show's greatest action set-pieces, while any scenes with Max, Holly and Henry are electrifying.

"The whole arc of season five seems a little safe"

The main problems, aside from the bickering (sorry to go on about it, but we're not going on half as much as the bickering went on in the show...), lie with the season's somewhat grinding plot mechanics. Linda Hamilton's Dr Kay is criminally underused, and the military presence in general seems like a clunky exercise in introducing extra tension. The kids jump to fortuitous conclusions about Vecna's modus operandi on demand, and craft outrageous plans based on suspiciously little intelligence. Plot threads are left dangling (what was that stone that transformed Henry?), while other parts of the mythology seem muddled (where were the Demogorgons in the final episode?).

In fact, the whole arc of season five seems a little *safe* – a remix of *Stranger Things*' greatest hits, lacking some killer new elements. (That said, moving Holly up to a main player and introducing the amusingly awful Derek "Suck my fat one" Turnbow were major plus points.)

But if the plot's all you worry about, you're missing what kept season five so damned watchable: the characters, the heart and the joyous geekiness. When the climactic battle is also an epic *D&D* gag, you have to love this show. Will's beautiful coming-out tale is perfectly tied into the story, emerging just at the right moment, while the Steve/Nancy/Jonathan love triangle has an unexpected – though completely believable – conclusion. As for Eleven's fate, it's a bittersweet, ambiguous ending that perfectly captures the show's themes about storytelling.

Dave Golder

i Holly's teacher, Mrs Harris, is played by Hope Hynes Love, the Duffer Brothers' real-life high school drama teacher.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **There's a flashback to some footage from a previous season.**
- **Somebody calls someone on a walkie talkie, but gets no response.**



- **A Demogorgon opens a rift.**
- **Will has one of his zoning-out moments and/or goosebumps.**
- **Electric lights flicker.**
- **"Running Up That Hill" plays.**

MOONHAVEN

The Way To Eden

★★☆☆☆

UK **Netflix, streaming now**

Creator **Peter Ocko**

Cast **Dominic Monaghan, Emma McDonald, Amara Karan, Joe Manganiello**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Over three years** since premiering in the States, this swiftly axed utopian drama has finally come to the UK. Welcome to *Brave New World* re-envisioned through the medium of interpretive dance. Okay, *Moonhaven* isn't quite that, but at times it feels frighteningly close.

It's set in a future where the Earth is a polluted pot of overpopulated, festering vileness. Humanity has decided the best solution is to set up a colony on the Moon where the inhabitants can work towards creating a utopian society that can then be exported back to Earth. Three generations later, the resulting lunar society is basically a drug-fuelled hippie commune, where everyone sings and dances their differences away, gadgets are made from wood, and an all-seeing AI stops people shooting each other. As the series opens, Earth is ready to accept these – literal – lunatics back to the motherworld, but a murder on the Moon opens up a whole new can of worms.

With a central concept that's almost impossible to buy into (honestly, no one on Earth would want these space hippies telling them how to live their lives) the show needs to work hard to convince you to keep watching. But it doesn't. It just gets more and more cringeworthy, with endless dancing and singing.

> **"A murder on the Moon opens up a whole new can of worms"**

Dominic Monaghan (*The Lord Of The Rings*, *Lost*) gives a winning performance as a witty, self-effacing Moon cop that's way beyond the call of duty, while the cast also includes Amara Karan (*Culprits*), Joe Manganiello (*Spider-Man*) and Ayelet Zurer (*Daredevil*).

There are a couple of half-decent surprise revelations and some genuinely funny moments. But mostly *Moonhaven* is a bizarre misfire, with a cheap '90s sci-fi TV design aesthetic, cutscene-style effects, and corny made-up jargon that's like Nadsat meets *Teletubbies*. **Dave Golder**



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i Episode five guest-stars Tim Plester, who wrote the 2005 spoof "Blake's Junction 7", set in Newport Pagnell service station.

IT: WELCOME TO DERRY Season One

Fears Of A Clown

★★★½☆

UK **NOW, streaming now**

US **HBO, streaming now**

Showrunners **Jason Fuchs, Brad Caleb Kane**

Cast **Bill Skarsgård, Chris Chalk, Matilda Lawler, Amanda Christine**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Let's start with** a brief history of *It* timelines. Stephen King's original novel was set in two time periods: following the Losers Club members as kids in the late '50s, then as adults in the mid '80s. Director Andy Muschietti's two *It* movies shunted things forward in time, with the kids in the late '80s and their adult selves in 2016.

Now we have this prequel series, soundly rooted in the continuity of Muschietti's films (he also directs half the episodes), which features a new "proto" Losers Club in the '60s, some of whom have connections to future Losers. Welcome to Derry, the Easter egg capital of the King-verse. Try to keep your eye on the plot and not be distracted by foreshadowing.

While the kids try not to get eaten by Pennywise, the US army has its own agenda for the dancing clown, which includes utilising Dick Hallorann's Shining abilities. Plus there's some not-so-casual racism and a hint of metaphysical time travel (watch out for a whole minefield of bootstrap paradoxes in future seasons).

Tonally, it's very much like the Muschietti movies, wavering between genuinely eerie and over-the-top cartoony CG splatterfests that come across like Scooby-Doo meets Dario Argento. There's a lot to admire, especially some of the performances (shout-outs to all the child stars and Chris Chalk, whose Hallorann deserves his own spinoff), an opening episode that seriously wrongfoots your expectations, and a Pennywise who's a horrifying force of nature.

But the series is overstuffed, with over-indulgent fan service, overblown effects, clunky "magical weapon" plotting, and cheesy dying speeches. The end result feels like a creepy show that's injected itself with way too many steroids, and ended up looking comically freakish. **Dave Golder**



i The herbal tea Rose makes for Hallorann contains maturin root. Maturin – a cosmic turtle – is It's nemesis in the novel.

BIRTH

About A Boy

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 2 FEBRUARY

2004 | 15 | 4K & Blu-ray

Director **Jonathan Glazer**

Cast **Nicole Kidman, Cameron Bright, Danny Huston, Lauren Bacall**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Of the four** features Jonathan Glazer has directed, the least appreciated remains *Birth*. His follow-up to gangster drama *Sexy Beast* is, er, a different kind of beast – a reincarnation-centred psychodrama that almost seems calculated to alienate a mainstream multiplex audience.

Glazer partnered initially with veteran French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière – a regular collaborator with Luis Buñuel – on the script, and despite subsequent rewrites, the film does feel of a piece with the likes of *Belle De Jour* and *The Phantom Of Liberty*. It builds an ordered, conservative, bourgeois world. Then, by probing at taboos, it takes a sledgehammer to the supporting walls.

Nicole Kidman plays Anna, who, 10 years after the death of husband Sean, is all set to remarry. Then her mother's birthday dinner is crashed by a 10-year-old neighbour (also called Sean), who calmly declares that he is her husband. Is it a prank? Is the boy disturbed? As Sean displays more and more intimate knowledge, her scepticism turns to belief.

This isn't such unusual territory for a supernatural drama: the likes of *Audrey Rose* cover not dissimilar ground. What's striking is that Glazer's film doesn't shy away from the premise's queasier implications. At one point, the lad undresses and steps into a bath with Anna, and she doesn't tell him to leave – a yikes moment doubly troubling since we've just seen him happily swinging about on a playground's monkey bars.

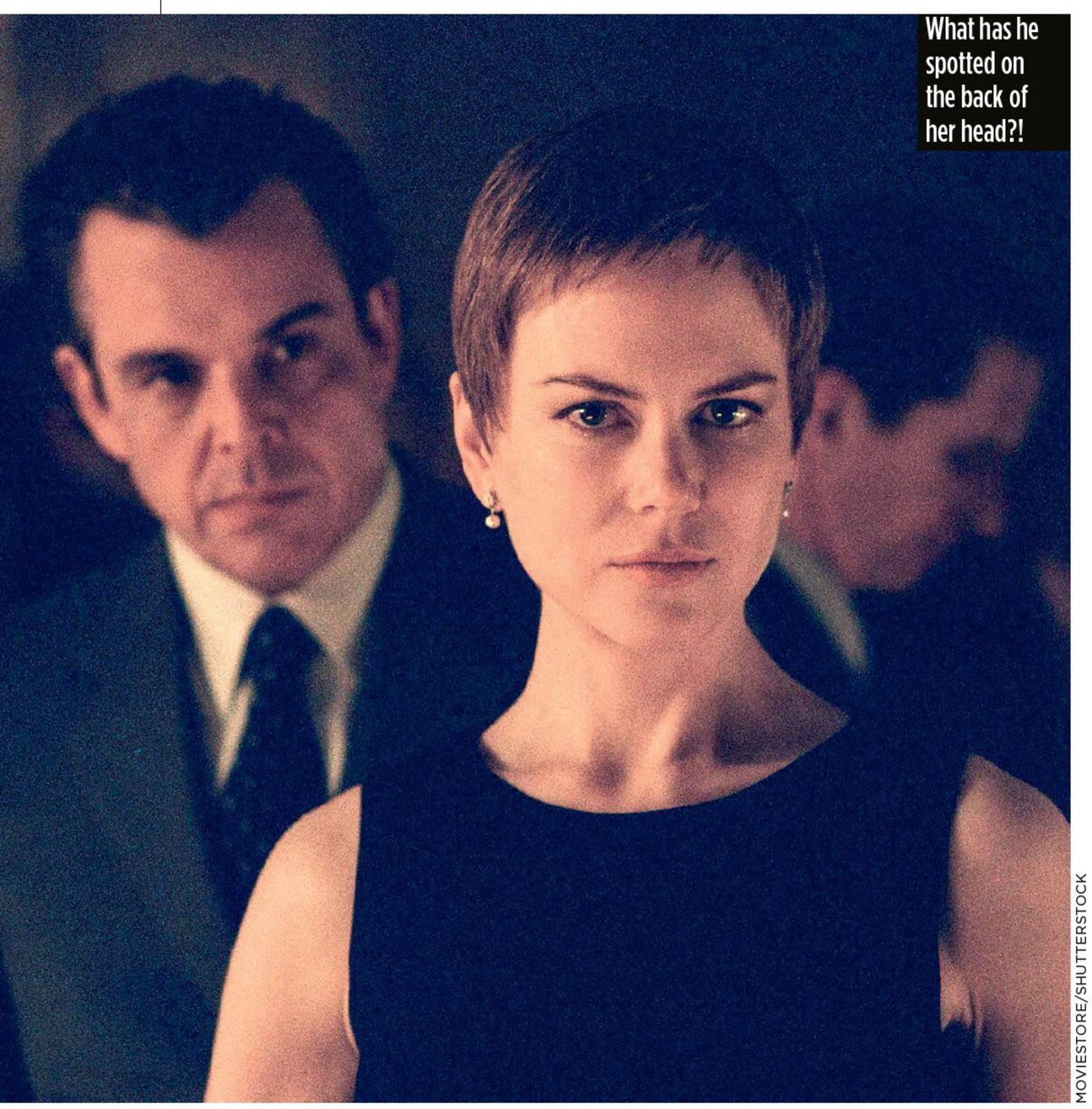
There's also not much for the average person to identify with in the rarefied circles Anna moves in, so you can see why *Birth* failed to connect with many viewers.

But it remains a beautifully crafted film, with powerful performances and accomplished set-pieces. Kidman excels as Anna, captivating in a sequence where the camera slowly zooms into a prolonged close-up as she processes her emotions. An opening Steadicam shot tracking her dead husband jogging through Central Park is masterfully done; so too a gathering where the calm facade of Anna's fiancé Joseph (Danny Huston) finally cracks, with explosive results. Young Cameron Bright, meanwhile, is a revelation as the mysterious boy, the intensity of his gaze seeming to speak of experience way behind his tender years. Discomfiting but fascinating viewing.

Extras Criterion Collection's dual-format edition features a new 4K restoration. The bonuses are all on the Blu-ray disc. "Making Birth" (30 minutes) makes clever use of EPK material (including rehearsal footage), intercutting a recent audio interview with the director. There's also a piece on the cinematography (25 minutes); interviewing camera operator Craig Haagensen and first assistant cameraman Eric Swanek, it discusses the willingness of DoP Harris Savides (sadly now deceased) to push things to the limit when it comes to desaturation and underexposure. This can get pretty technical, but that will lend it even more appeal for people who care about film stocks and lenses. Finally, Glazer and Kidman are quizzed by US TV host Charlie Rose in a surprisingly intelligent talk-show discussion (2004, 28 minutes), which draws a brilliant quote from the director: "It felt like we were jumping off a cliff and building our wings on the way down." Plus: trailer; booklet.

Ian Berriman

> **"It remains a beautifully crafted film"**



What has he spotted on the back of her head?!

MOVIESTORE/SHUTTERSTOCK

i During production the script was in a "constant state of flux", with rewrites being delivered every day.



HUESERA: THE BONE WOMAN

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Michelle Garza Cervera**

Cast **Natalia Solián, Alfonso Dosal, Mayra Batalla, Sonia Couoh**

You're going to need to turn the volume up for this one. Formerly released on Shudder, now available on crisp Arrow Video Blu-ray, *Huesera: The Bone Woman* is a psychological body horror that works best when you can hear every bone crack loud enough to feel it.

Valeria and Raúl are a picture-perfect couple, about to have their first child. But pregnancy does weird things to Valeria. One night, she sees a woman jump from a balcony, breaking all her legs grotesquely – but when Raúl looks, there's no one there. The spectre haunts Valeria, whose own bones seem to want to crack too...

There's so much to admire about this film, from its impeccable production design to its unsettling foley and its juxtaposition of folk magic and punk-rock queerness with comfortable, banal domesticity.

Best of all, though, is its compelling, heart-rending lead performance. Valeria is a woman trapped in a cage of her own making, desperate to escape but afraid the price of authenticity is too high. Natalia Soliàn's performance gets across every nuance, making you sympathise with her even at her worst. This one will stay with you, in the best possible way.

Extras Kat Ellinger provides commentary; fellow critic Anton Bitel an 18-minute video essay. Plus: trailer; gallery; booklet. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE MEDIUM

A Power move

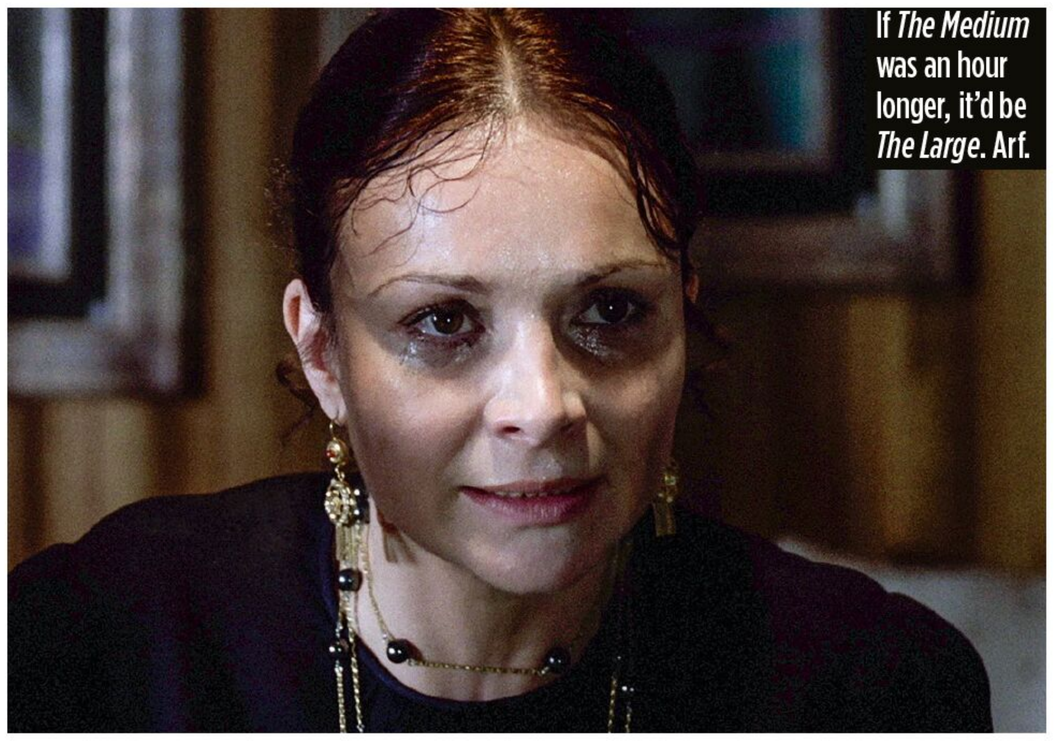
★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 16 FEBRUARY

1980 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Silvio Amadio**

Cast **Guido Mannari, Sherry Buchanan, Stefano Mastrogirolamo**


If *The Medium* was an hour longer, it'd be *The Large*. Arf.

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Inspired by** director Silvio Amadio's friendship with a real-life medium, this film is not what you'd expect from an Italian horror released in 1980. Barring some comical shots of an Alsatian's decapitated head (clearly a pooch with its body hidden under the floor), there are no gruesome shocks. If not quite the obverse of Lucio Fulci, it's certainly a more sober, gothic affair.

Guido Mannari plays a modern composer, widowed since his wife died in a car crash, who's beset by strange goings-on: noises in the attic; a phantom dog attack; a voice whispering, "You're going to die!" Plus his son has a new imaginary friend, a mysterious raven-haired woman in a white dress. Eventually, the amusingly named Professor Power, a TV spiritualist capable of bilocation, is called in.

Sounds fun, doesn't it? But *The Medium* is one of the beigest of Italian horrors. A climactic seance where the heroes *sit around on sofas* rather sums it up. Plus en route you must repeatedly endure a cheesy keyboard-funk cue that'd be at home on *Now That's What I Call The Worst Lift Muzak Ever*.

⊕ **Extras** This Treasured Films release has three new cast/crew interviews. Writer Claudio Fragasso (20 minutes) entertains the most: casually dismissing the film (fag in hand) as "facile" and "not technically interesting", he's one cool dude. A chat with actor Martine Brochard (seven minutes) proves to be a complete nothingburger. Co-star Sherry Buchanan (25 minutes) gesticulates so much it's like she's trying to provide sign language; one can't help wondering whether this is because her interlocutor is Italian... Said fellow, Eugenio Ercolani, provides a useful overview of Amadio's career (24 minutes). A fifth featurette begins by rattling off composers in horror (17 minutes), then veers all over the place, taking in killer pianos and random horror scores. Film critics Jonathan Rigby and Kevin Lyons provide an astute observational commentary. Plus: gallery; booklet. A webstore exclusive edition adds a magnet and an A3 poster. **Ian Berriman**

i Writer Claudio Fragasso has a cameo near the end, as one of a group of people participating in a seance.

DEVIL TIMES FIVE

Child's Play

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1974 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Sean MacGregor**

Cast **Sorrell Booke, Gene Evans, Taylor Lacher, Shelley Morrison**


"Did someone ask for a Windows update?"

BLU-RAY DEBUT **One of those films** which visibly bears the scars of a troubled production (in this case, a fired director and extensive reshoots), this unevenly paced killer kids flick doesn't make a lick of sense, but has its guilty pleasure moments of bizarre extremity.

Future teen idol Leif Garrett is one of five kids from a psychiatric hospital, set loose after a van transporting them crashes in the snow. Taken in by residents of a lakeside chalet, soon they're offing them in a variety of nasty ways.

Why one's dressed as a nun is one of many things unexplained. And initially it all seems terribly tame. The first kill is presented in sepia-toned slow-mo, dragging on for five minutes, surely a desperate ploy to extend the running time.

In the latter stages, however, it gets memorably gruesome – one unfortunate has piranhas dropped in her bath. The 11-year-old Garrett has disturbing sequences where he cross-dresses and acts oddly seductive towards Sorrell Booke (later Boss Hogg in *The Dukes Of Hazzard*). John Waters fans may appreciate a titillating catfight. So while you couldn't, by any sensible metric, call it a *good* film, it has a certain piquancy for those with a taste for the warped.

⊕ **Extras** This 88 Films release draws on bonuses from Vinegar Syndrome's 2024 US edition. Stephen Thrower (26 minutes) brings his usual rigorous research and smart observations, picking apart the director's CV embroidery and noting how the van driver is three different actors! Bruce Wank (stop it), son of a producer, recalls hanging out on set as a kid (nine minutes), while second AD Walter Dominguez (20 minutes) broaches the behind-the-scenes conflict. For the full inside skinny, you must turn to a 2006 DVD retrospective (22 minutes), in which producer Michael Blowitz recounts putting the director through a plate-glass window! Reshoots director David Sheldon also gets his say.

There's a new commentary from slasher podcast The Hysteria Continues, and an archival one featuring Blowitz, Sheldon, and two cast. Plus: seven minutes of offcuts from the 2006 featurette; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i The piranhas in the bath scene were real, dead ones, which had been frozen. The teeth of one still cut the actor though!

JIMMY AND STIGGS

Hack Your ETs Up

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 16 FEBRUARY
2026 | 18 | Digital
Director **Joe Begos**
Cast **Joe Begos, Matt Mercer**

The latest by Joe Begos, director of solid indie horrors like *VFW* and *Bliss*, arrives beneath an "Eli Roth Presents" banner as the premiere release of the gorehound's new media company The Horror Section.

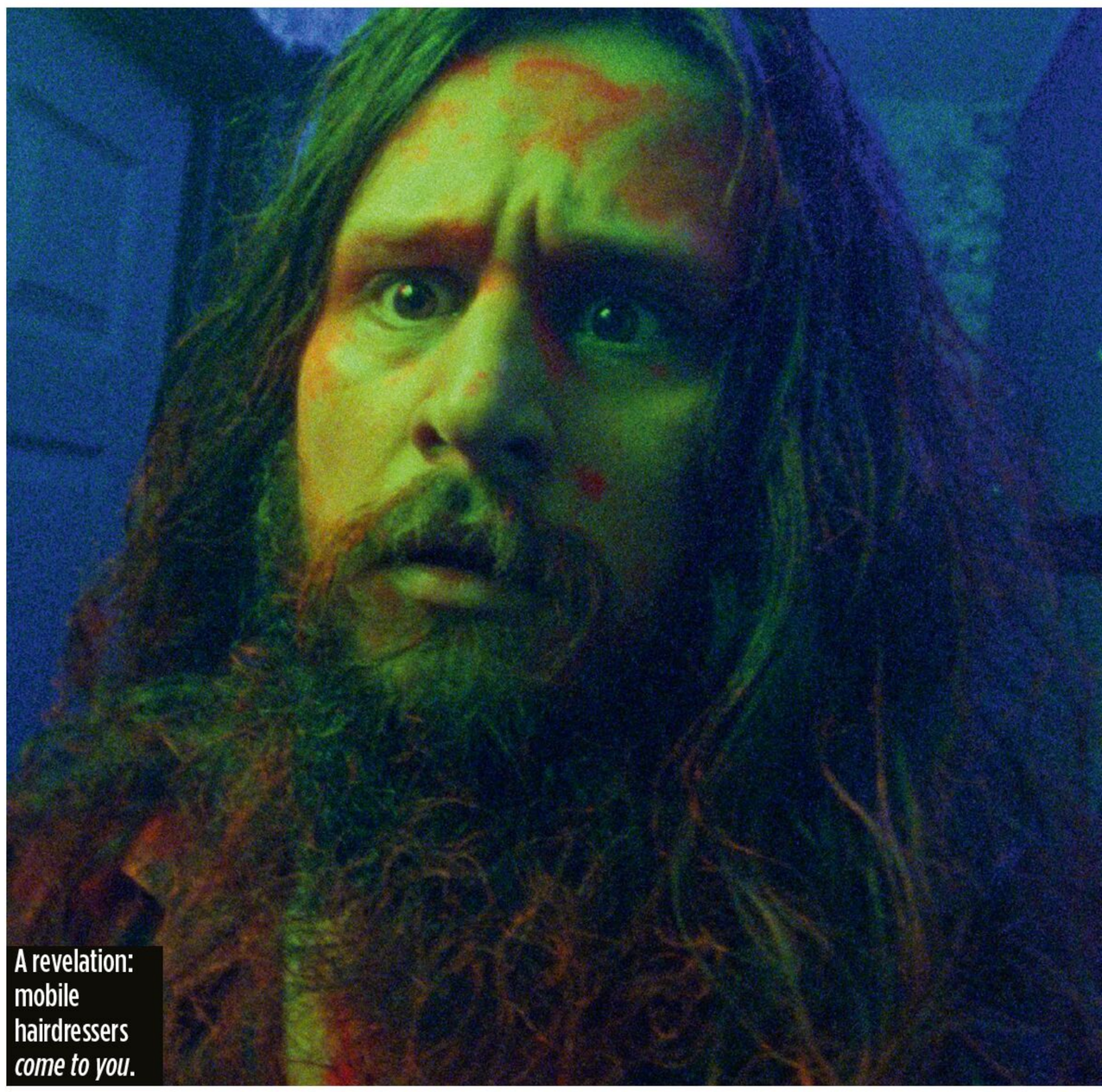
Bound to one location, it centres on cocaine-hoovering filmmaker Jimmy (Begos himself). Assailed by endearingly shonky alien Greys, he rings estranged pal Stiggs (Matt Mercer). Subsequently finding themselves trapped in his apartment, door and windows inexplicably blocked by brick walls, the two men fight off the "melonheads" with violence as lurid as the film's colour scheme, increasingly drenched in fluorescent blood, like the victims of a '90s rave massacre.

Opening in POV style like the video for The Prodigy's "Smack My Bitch Up", *Jimmy And Stiggs* initially promises to deliver a stimulant buzz. But while extremity can be entertaining, in this case the results are tediously one-note. About 80% of the dialogue consists of "fuck", "motherfucker" and "cocksucker". Another 10% is roars and grunts. There's nothing in the way of light or shade, and really no narrative worth speaking of.

A quick blast of Napalm Death can be refreshing. Eighty-odd minutes of hearing it cranked up to 11 is numbing.

Calvin Baxter

i The film was shot in Begos's apartment. He began work during Covid-19, with filming spread across four years.



A revelation: mobile hairdressers *come to you.*



THE RIP MAN

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2026 | N/A | Digital

Anyone with dental trauma will want to avoid this one – although, to be fair, so will fans of competent filmmaking. This micro-budget British tale of a gummy psycho killer is almost fascinatingly incompetent. Its script is perfunctory, its editing baggy, its sound mix chaotic and the acting awkward. Somehow, the lighting is very professional. That one redeeming quality, combined with an utterly unhinged premise (a toothless killer! Obsessed with teeth-shaped toys!) makes it oddly compelling. Rubbish, but endearing rubbish. **Sarah Dobbs**



MOTHER OF FLIES

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2026 | N/A | SVOD

SHUDDER **The latest from** filmmaking clan The Adams Family sees a young woman with cancer (Zelda Adams) visiting a highly unconventional healer (Zelda's mum, Toby Poser), sceptic dad (Poser's husband, John Adams) in tow.

The production design is a triumph: healer Solveig's cottage, with its internal trees and beds of moss, is somewhere Hansel and Gretel might have come to a sticky end. However, historical flashbacks render the big twist no surprise, and the witch's poetic turn of phrase soon wears thin. **Ian Berriman**



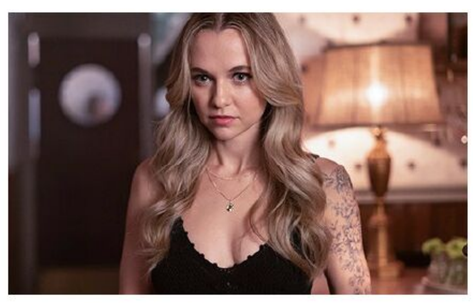
QUARANTINE 19

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2022 | N/A | Digital

Say what you like about the ethics of reality TV, but it feels pretty unlikely that any *Big Brother* producer would really let a houseful of contestants stay ignorant while a pandemic destroyed the world.

That's the premise of this daft Turkish horror, and it's initially an interesting one – how long would it take for housemates to realise no one was watching them any more? But once that's established, the film runs out of ideas; there's one scene of wince-inducing gore, then a dull stumble to the end. **Sarah Dobbs**



WITCHBOARD

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 2 FEBRUARY
2025 | 15 | Digital

Though based on a 1986 horror of the same name, this reimagining bears practically no similarity to it, barring a scene of a woman trapped in a scalding shower. That centred on a ouija board; here it's a 17th century pendulum board – and this time there's actually a witch, who uses it as a means of resurrection. The vibrant New Orleans setting is also new.

This being 2026, it's bloodier too, with copious VFX, and the leads all look like models. Some may consider that an upgrade, but the cheesy original had more charm. **Ian Berriman**

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Soul music

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED 2 FEBRUARY

2023/2024 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Takashi Shimizu**

Cast **Tomoko Hoshi, Marika Yamakawa, Nagisa Shibuya, Ikoi Hayase**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **If retro tech isn't** being reclaimed by hipsters then it's powering the chills in Japanese horror. In our relentlessly digital age, abandoned media possess not just authenticity but an inherent sense of otherness that can so easily tip into the creepy.

While *Ring* centred on a cursed VHS tape, paranormal procedural *Sana* fetishes an equally analogue cassette recorder that spawns a distinctly deadly earworm. Returning to J-horror, *Ju-On*'s Takashi Shimizu indulges in some familiar genre tropes – not least a malevolent, raven-haired female spirit – as he builds to a climax that delivers some genuinely disturbing imagery.

Suffused with a doomy, mildewed atmosphere, the film's an unlikely vehicle for boy band Generations from Exile Tribe, which for fans of J-pop must feel a little like finding The Monkees in *Rosemary's Baby*.

Slow-burn sequel *Sana: Let Me Hear* ditches the lads in favour of idol singer Nagisa Shibuya. She acquits herself well in an altogether bleaker, more melancholy tale that deepens the mythology of its predecessor. If it feels unduly elliptical at times, that also deepens the unease.

> **"Takashi Shimizu indulges in some familiar genre tropes"**



Her new face masks were *not* having the desired effect.

Extras The one brand-new bonus on this Arrow Video release sees J-horror specialist Amber T providing an illuminating potted history of the genre, placing the films in their cinematic context (17 minutes).

Each movie gets a dedicated Making Of, complete with a wealth of behind-the-scenes video and insights from Shimizu and others (59 minutes/83 minutes). Deleted scenes offer an alternate ending to *Sana* and a generous amount of cut footage from *Let Me Hear* (five minutes/28 minutes). Plus: trailers; teasers; a booklet with new writing on the films by Asian cinema expert Hayley Scanlon.

Nick Setchfield

i Despite being only 32, Generations from Exile Tribe's Alan Shirahama has a huge cassette tape collection.

FULL MOON HIGH

Perma-teen Wolf

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1981 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Larry Cohen**

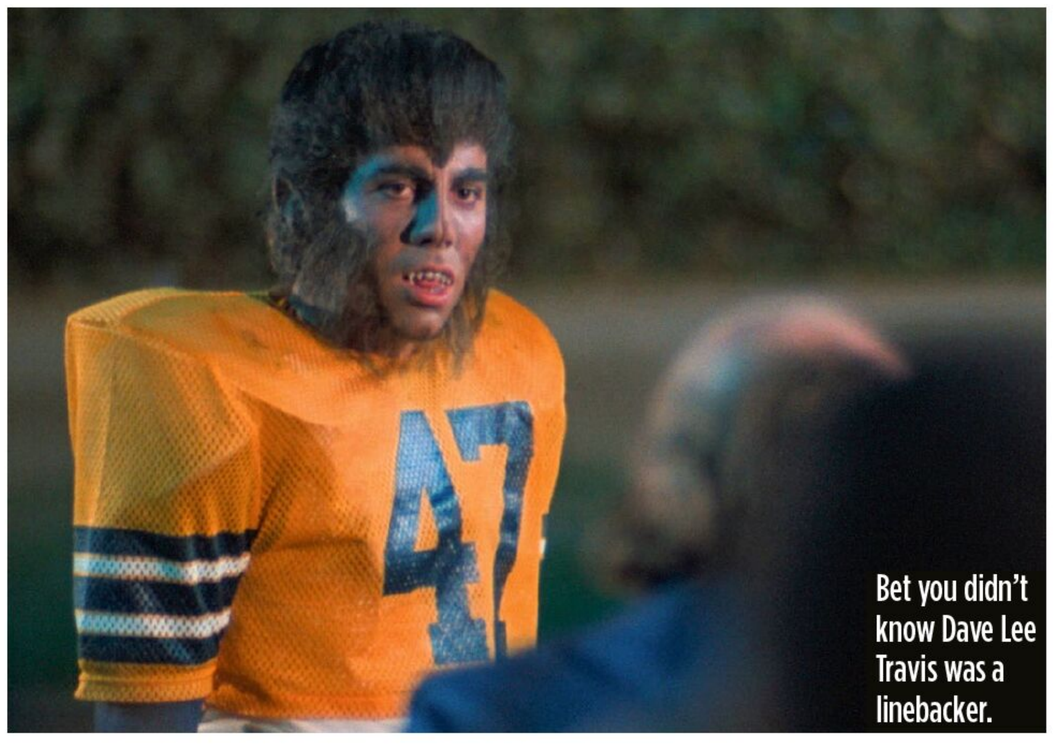
Cast **Adam Arkin, Roz Kelly, Ed McMahon, Joanne Nail**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Fans of the prolific** B-movie writer/director Larry Cohen are being spoiled rotten of late, with *The Ambulance*, *The Stuff* and *Uncle Sam* all recipients of new editions (and *Special Effects* on the way soon). The latest to get the treatment is this goofy werewolf comedy.

Tweaking the mythology in line with vampirism so that lycanthropy confers immortality, the storyline sees Adam Arkin's teen Tony Walker bitten in Romania and "turned" into a Universal-style Wolf Man, then returning (unaged) to high school two decades later. The motivation here is sketchy, to say the least.

Edited in choppy fashion (so choppy you begin to suspect sequences went unfilmed), and entirely free of horror (Tony only inspires mild annoyance by his nibbling of butts), it's a spoofy affair with "predatory gays" humour, metatextual touches (a running gag sees a violinist turning up on-screen), and dialled-up performances. The hit rate of the jokes is fairly low, with many crying out for a "Ba-dum, tish!" rimshot (you can probably guess how a newspaper headline "Wolf Man Eats Chinese" finishes...)

Things pick up whenever Alan Arkin (father of Adam) is on-screen, deliciously withering as an unsympathetic shrink. But generally you can't help reflecting that Mel Brooks did this sort of thing much better.



Bet you didn't know Dave Lee Travis was a linebacker.

Extras This Eureka Entertainment edition comes with three new bonuses. An interview with film writer Michael Doyle (25 minutes) usefully draws on his conversations with Cohen for a book. Kaja Franck's rather high-flown video essay (18 minutes) addresses topics such as the film's "intertextual relationship" with 1957's *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*. Finally, there's a new commentary by Steve Mitchell, director of 2017 documentary *King Cohen*; fine, but you're better off sticking with the archival track (moderated by Mitchell) which is crammed with entertaining anecdotes from the writer/director himself. Plus: booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i At one point we see a portrait of a black, female US President on the wall. Cohen used a photograph of his housekeeper!

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TIM TRAVERS AND THE TIME TRAVELER'S PARADOX

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | N/A | Digital

Director **Stimson Snead**

Cast **Samuel Dunning, Felicia Day, Danny Trejo, Keith David**

Milking laughs from the finer points of quantum mechanics may be a challenge. But as this quirky indie knows, the laws of causality lie at the very heart of comedy.

Samuel Dunning is the titular Tim – no fewer than 17 Tims, in fact, as the credits testify – a boffin determined to break the time barrier, if not reality itself. His experiments spawn a series of doppelgängers, most of whom are inclined to blow each other's heads off, just to test the truth of paradox theory. Along the way Tim's also targeted by hitmen, and becomes romantically entangled with Felicia Day's radio producer.

Powered by concepts that would give even Christopher Nolan a cerebral aneurysm, it's a film whose ambition outstrips its budget (a dive bar and a industrial workspace provide the major locations). But the interactions between the Tims are seamlessly done, allowing you to savour the comic nuances in Dunning's performances. An awkward self-crush between two of the Tims is beautifully played.

Improbably touching, it all builds to a Douglas Adams-style riff on the nature of life itself, smuggling some genuine philosophy among the quantum smartarsery. **Nick Setchfield**



Would you let this leafy chap get into your plants?

SWAMP THING

Big Moss Man

★★½☆☆ **EXTRAS** ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 9 FEBRUARY

1982 | 15 | 4K & Blu-ray

Director **Wes Craven**

Cast **Adrienne Barbeau, Ray Wise, Dick Durock, Louis Jourdan**

Future *Scream* supremo Wes Craven brings DC's bayou-haunting icon to the screen in this horror-tinged comic adaptation.

While reasonably faithful to the character's origin story – targeted by bad guys, a research scientist is transformed into a hulking but noble vegebeast – Craven's vision is fatally compromised by its budget. Frequently undone by risible monster costumes, it's an uneven watch that carries the whiff of a cheapjack '80s action flick, despite making stabs at the kind of eco-lyricism Alan Moore would subsequently perfect on the page.

Rising above it all is Adrienne Barbeau, who as Alice Cable makes for a sardonic, kick-ass lead and inter-species love interest, despite being saddled with an apocalyptic perm she now officially disowns.

Extras 88 Films' attractive 4K remaster offers both the American theatrical release (91 minutes) and the uncut, distinctly norkier international version (93 minutes). There's also a choice of three commentaries: Craven and make-up artist William Munns on the US theatrical release; a new track by film journos Dave Wain and Matty Budrewicz on the international cut.

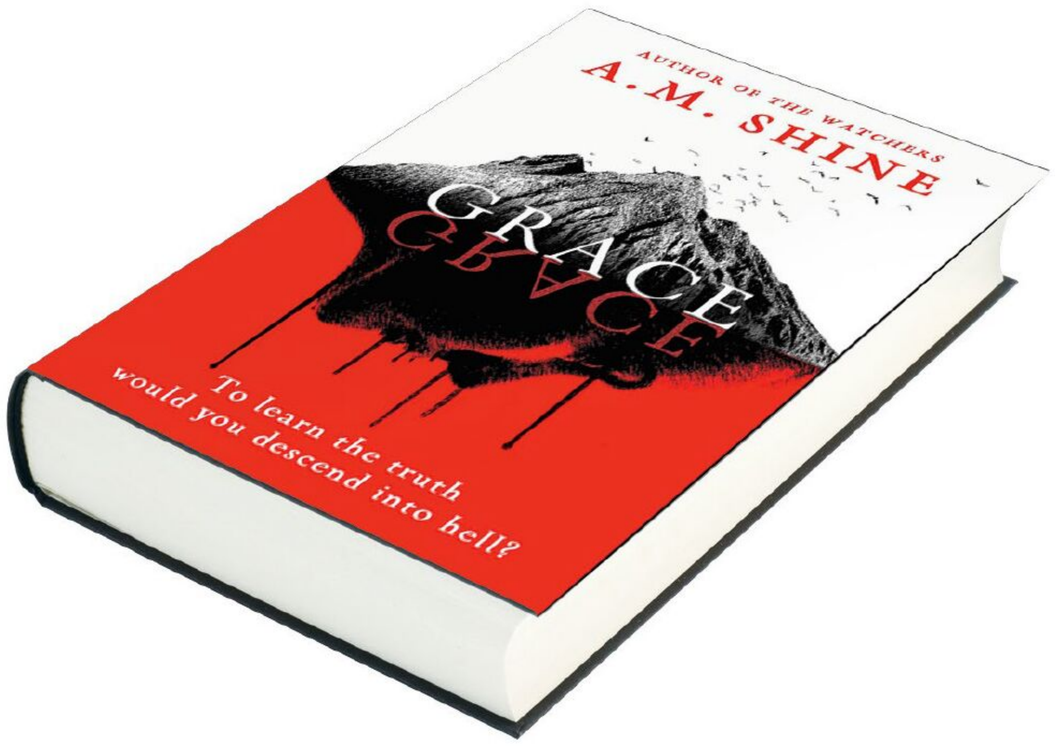
New to this disc is an interview with the personable Mimi Craven, reflecting on both her turn in the movie and her real life meet-cute with future husband Wes (17 minutes). Recycled from previous releases are 2013 interviews with Barbeau (16 minutes) and co-star Reggie Batts (13 minutes), alongside a welcome chat with Swamp Thing's co-creator, comics writer Len Wein (13 minutes). From 2018 come insights from production designer Robb Wilson King (20 minutes) and critic Kim Newman, who provides valuable context as ever (17 minutes). Plus: gallery; trailer. This dual-format Limited Edition comes with four art cards and a double-sided poster. **Nick Setchfield**

i While the movie was filmed on location in South Carolina, the production had to import Spanish moss from Georgia.

(ROUND UP)



Yorgos Lanthimos's latest, **BUGONIA** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 9 February), is a remake of Korean film *Save The Green Planet!* It centres on two men who kidnap a pharma CEO (Emma Stone), believing she's an alien bent on destroying the planet. We said: "That rare remake which finds new things to say rather than simply pumping out a carbon copy." Just one bonus: a 23-minute Making Of. Ethan Hawke's child snatcher The Grabber returns from the grave as a vengeful Freddy Krueger type in **BLACK PHONE 2** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now), which shifts the emphasis from original hero Finn to his psychic sister Gwen, and the action to a snowed-in youth camp, We said: "Would have done well to heed its forerunner's less is more mindset." Extras: director's commentary, seven deleted scenes, and three featurettes (32 minutes). In fantastical comedy **GOOD FORTUNE** (out now, Blu-ray), Keanu Reeves's angel arranges for Aziz Ansari's odd-job man to swap bodies with Seth Rogen's rich entrepreneur. We said: "Has fun toying with the farcical potential of its *Freaky Friday* scenario... the latter stages founder on its creator's good intentions." Extras: commentary with Ansari; three featurettes (32 minutes). Set in Vietnam in 1968, **PRIMITIVE WAR** (Blu-ray/DVD, out now) sees a rescue team sent to an isolated valley in search of a missing platoon, and encountering dinosaurs. We said: "A fairly decent dinosaur movie, and a fairly decent Vietnam movie. But it overplays the homage card." Bonuses: director's commentary, a 10-minute behind-the-scenes piece.



GRACE

Island life. And death...

★★★★☆

RELEASED 12 FEBRUARY

304 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **AM Shine**

Publisher **Head of Zeus**

Lying off the west coast of Ireland, Croaghnakeela isn't a place to spend a holiday. At least not in the fictionalised version portrayed in AM Shine's latest novel, a study of what happens when secrets fester. Instead, it's shown as "an island of lost dreams", a place where children are notable by their absence and an ageing population gets by as best they can while trying not to think about the past.

It's a forbidding place, yet it draws a bookseller, Grace, who receives a call from the island's priest after her biological mother dies. A young woman who was adopted and knows little about her origins, she ignores the horror flick 101 clue of a ferryman who refuses to leave his boat as he drops her at the island. Grace heads ashore – and into a nightmare where a creature from Irish mythology, a grotesque child thief called The Bodach, holds sway.

How has this happened? In a claustrophobic novel where you're never too far from an argument between neighbours, a troubled spirit that can't yet leave this realm or a scene involving copious spatters of gore, Shine shows us the story. It's a tale we see from multiple perspectives, and one that shifts between present and past – to the extent that you have to pay close attention or risk misunderstanding the chronology.

Throughout, Shine chills the atmosphere. His fictionalised Croaghnakeela is not just unwelcoming, but somehow grows ancient and louring – a character in itself. The sense of the island being a sodden prison that it's hopeless even to think about trying to leave is palpable.

Equally admirable is Shine's portrayal of its inhabitants, who gather at the local pub with a kind of studied determination. These are people who collectively did something terrible in the past and frequently loathe each other, yet they also need a sense of connection. There's also a heartbreaking sense of people who know their lives on the island have become impossible, yet on some level long for the idea of how things used to be in what should be a rugged yet idyllic spot.

It's somewhat ironic that, interviewed by *SFX* last issue, Shine said he didn't care for horror novels that turned out to be about family dynamics or local politics. In truth, much of *Grace* is concerned with just these themes. At least in part, that's because it's essentially a folk horror novel. It's a genre, after all, that's so often about isolated communities and how they function – or don't function, as things start to spin out of control, arguably a particular feature of the 21st-century revival in folk horror at a time of extremes when a simple social media post can reveal that you really don't know your neighbours as well as you thought.

Nevertheless, these are characters with whom you want to spend time. That's especially true of the priest, Robin, who in tempting Grace to the island catastrophically breaks a trust. Yet, Robin is also decent and brave, and even the worst of the islanders is at least someone whose actions we come to understand. *Grace* also reminds you that even people beaten down by trauma can sometimes draw on reservoirs of bravery. In this sense, the book's

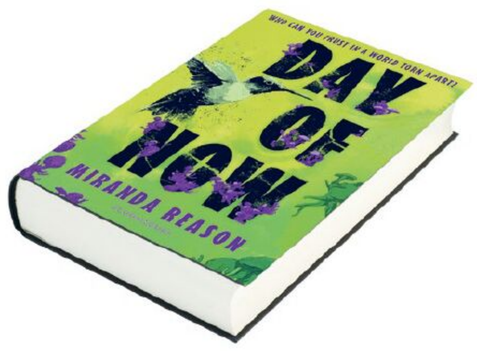
> **"These are characters with whom you want to spend time"**

title references the dignity of doing the right thing at the death.

As for the plot, it's difficult to relay without ruining things, especially as *Grace* turns on a couple of twists that shift its trajectory. Indeed, there's something of M Night Shyamalan in Shine's writing – he clearly gets a kick out of pulling the rug from beneath you.

Some readers may find this irritating, particularly in a book that deliberately ignores the plot beats you would find in a more conventional genre story. Then again, writers who try something new are rare. For all that *Grace* is an uneven novel, don't be surprised if AM Shine turns out to have a long and lauded career ahead. **Jonathan Wright**

i Though uninhabited today, Croaghnakeela was once settled; the ruins of a sixth- or seventh-century church remain.



DAY OF NOW

★★★½☆

RELEASED 12 FEBRUARY

416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Miranda Reason**

Publisher **Bloomsbury Publishing**

As post-apocalyptic dystopian worlds go, the one in *Day Of Now* is especially grim... and very familiar.

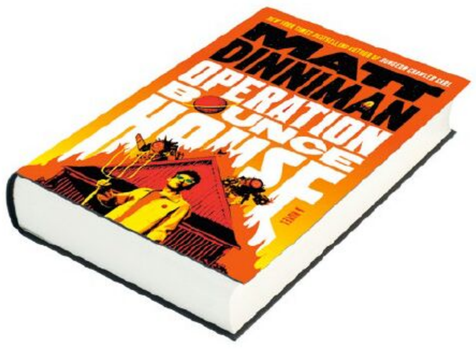
Civilisation as we know it has fallen apart thanks to a mutated fungus whose spores cause either death or... well, they call it "the craze", but it's basically the *28 Days Later* flavour of zombies. Standard enough rules, then, but with a nasty post-Covid twist.

Our protagonists are Dayna and Pax, two kids on the run after their dad got bitten. In desperation, they called the Hummingbirds for help. This incongruously named pseudo-military organisation couldn't, it turns out, be trusted.

The other obvious comparison is *The Girl With All The Gifts*, both because of the plant-based apocalypse, and because its protagonist has to reject even well-meaning adults to forge their own future. The stakes for Dayna and her cohort are often life and death, but they're also ideological: what does it mean to save the world if you have to sacrifice your humanity in the process?

In its final third, *Day Of Now* finally asserts its own identity, leading to a dramatic climax that almost begs to be put on a cinema screen. In the end, it's a stark warning to readers of the dangers of clinging to outdated establishments. It's just a shame about the whole rage-zombie bit. **Sarah Dobbs**

Reviews



OPERATION BOUNCE HOUSE

★★★★☆

RELEASED 12 FEBRUARY

440 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Matt Dinniman**

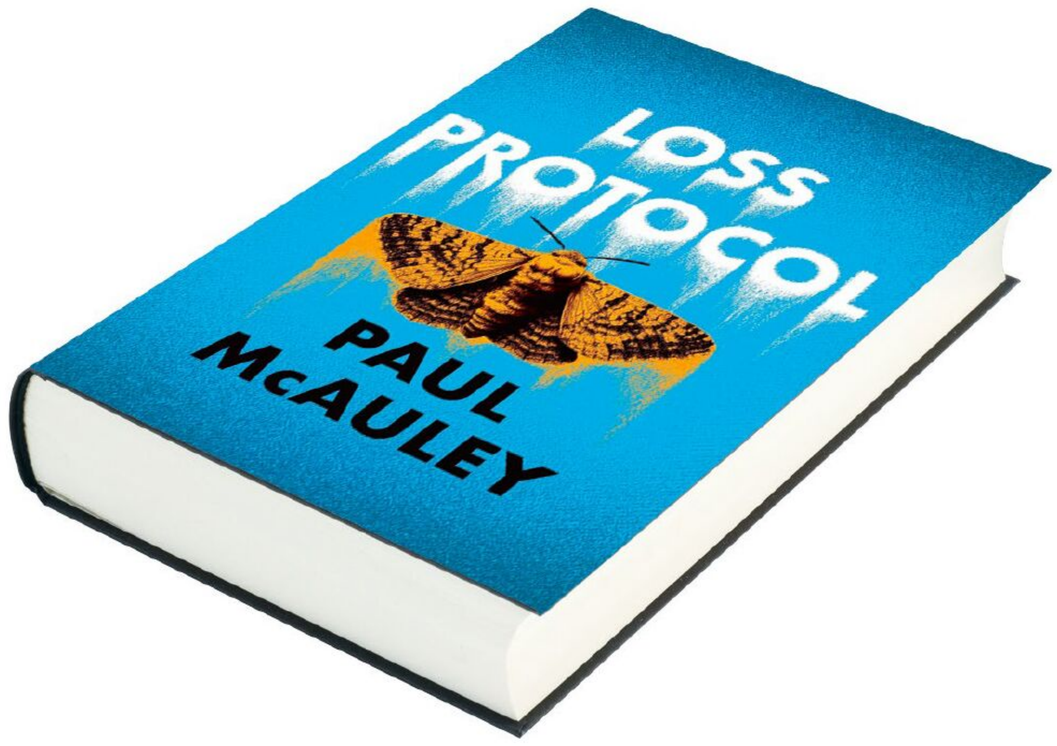
Publisher **Michael Joseph**

Taking in everything from generation ships and sentient AI to social media and *Ready Player One*-style pop culture references, *Operation Bounce House* is a tricky book to pin down.

It's also, for the most part, an extremely entertaining action novel about a group of settlers under siege on an alien world. The big twist here is that farmer Oliver Lewis and his 20-something mates are battling an army of mechs controlled by gamers back on Earth, all of whom have paid for the privilege of wiping out the alleged insurgents of New Sonora.

You can't fault author Matt Dinniman for ambition. As well as being, at times, the story of a brutal war against an enemy with vastly superior firepower, *Operation Bounce House* points a satirical finger at AI, greedy corporations and toxic behaviour online. It sometimes struggles to navigate its tonal shifts, however, as the juvenile humour – think early Kevin Smith films – jars with the book's darker themes.

That said, Dinniman has a knack for making important reveals at the right time, taking several leftfield narrative turns that pay off. And in the heroes' condescending household AI Roger, the book has unleashed a truly memorable, laugh-out-loud funny supporting player. **Richard Edwards**



LOSS PROTOCOL

Regrets and revelations

★★★★½

RELEASED 12 FEBRUARY

384 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Paul McAuley**

Publisher **Gollancz**

We are living through a decade when the literary establishment seems increasingly fascinated with the techniques of science fiction. No wonder. In the era of Trump, climate change and huge technological change, science fiction offers a ready-made tool kit to grapple with what lies just ahead.

One result here is that those who say they don't like SFF will tackle a new slipstream novel by Ian McEwan, while remaining sniffy about "genre". It's a shame, because they miss so much. For example, the work of Paul McAuley, whose latest novel conjures up a Britain where climate change, extreme weather events and ecological breakdown are day-to-day realities, even mundane facets of life.

At the centre of *Loss Protocol* lies Marc Winters, a wildlife ranger hiding from his past on a small island. His sister, Izzy, a woman he believes to have been dead for years, was a member of a deep-green cult devoted to healing the world. In a book that riffs on the mysticism and mythology of Albion, their method for effecting this fix-up is shared dreams keyed off by psychotropic mushrooms.

But when there's a break-in at Winter's narrowboat home, seemingly by those associated with the cult in search of information, he's drawn back into the wider world – as well as one of counterterrorism, and discreet rooms where good chaps with good connections make difficult decisions for the greater good. Throughout, as with McAuley's *Austral*, there's a sense of a writer engaging with the climate crisis in a way that perhaps only Kim Stanley Robinson has equalled in recent years.

It all makes for a novel you can certainly read as a plot-driven, noir-tinged SF thriller, albeit one where too much of the plot is carried by people talking rather than doing – or as a compelling character study of Winters, a joint-smoking semi-dropout, and a damaged man, but also someone who seeks to do the right thing, as when he fatefully offers help to a kid who washes up on his shores. On this form, to echo a point previously made by Adam Roberts, McAuley is Britain's best science fiction novelist. **Jonathan Wright**

i *Loss Protocol*'s title reflects, to quote McAuley's blog, the way it deals with "different species of grief".



VIVIAN DIES AGAIN

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

416 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **CE Hulse**

Publisher **Viper Books**

How do you solve a murder mystery when the person being murdered is... you?

Viv is the black sheep of her family; the one without a career or a husband, who parties too hard and doesn't plan for the future. And she almost didn't get one, because at a memorial service for her uncle and his wife, she's pushed off a balcony by an unseen assailant.

But then she wakes up a few hours earlier... with no memory of what happened. And not for the first time. She's in a *Happy Death Day* scenario, already many repetitions deep, but the only person who remembers is Jamie, a waiter at the memorial. He stays aware every time, explaining the whole thing as quickly as he can to each new Viv incarnation. With an exhausted Jamie by her side, Viv will have to figure out which of her estranged family members hates her enough to want her dead.

As always with these kinds of stories, the mystery is almost beside the point. It's well-plotted, but the suspect pool is limited, and the red herrings a bit whiffy. What makes it work is the characters. She might be a total disaster, but it's impossible not to root for Viv as she stumbles chaotically towards finally getting her act together. (And helping Jamie out with his issues, too.)

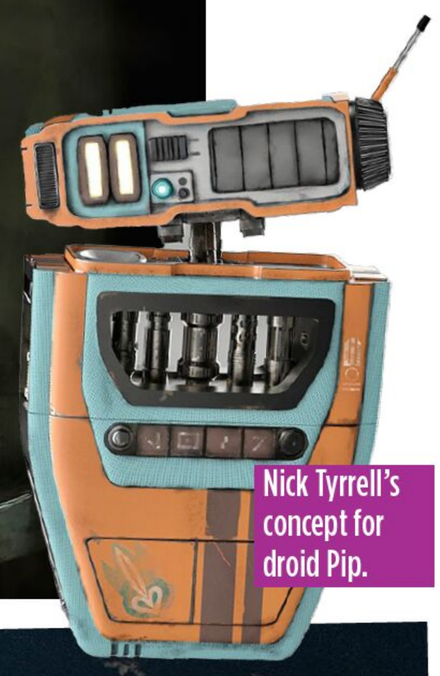
The last page is one of the most satisfying endings ever written – a gift to those of us who have tricky relationships with our families. **Sarah Dobbs**



A noodle bar alien (Sophie Fretwell).



Noodle bar aliens (Louis Wiltshire).



Nick Tyrrell's concept for droid Pip.



A space cruiser concept by Ryan Church.

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THE ART OF STAR WARS: THE ACOLYTE

The High Art Republic

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 5 FEBRUARY

224 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Kristin Baver**

Publisher **Abrams**

Seeing as *The Acolyte* aired a year and a half ago and was cancelled soon after, this art book is a little late to the party – unfortunately, it still feels a tad rushed. There's enough beautiful concept art to fill a space cruiser, of course, as hundreds of images show off the painstaking design work that went into bringing the High Republic era to TV. It's less successful, however, when it comes to putting its visual riches into context.

The exposition is mostly crammed into blocks of text introducing themed chapters, where numerous members of the creative team reveal their thought processes. Some quotes also find their way into explanatory captions, though too many of these are of the perfunctory "Jedi in cave" variety. Meanwhile, some odd design choices make it surprisingly difficult to work out which text corresponds to each image.



An Osha space suit pitch, by Brian Matyas.

It's a shame, because there's enough trivia for this to have been a great read. For example, Lucasfilm boss Kathleen Kennedy suggested making Jedi robes more colourful than the usual "beige and off white" so they'd stand out better in toy shops. But really, this is more a gallery of pretty pictures than a satisfying journey behind the scenes. **Richard Edwards**

i Rodent-like tracker Bazil's Tynnan species first appeared in 1979 spinoff novel *Han Solo's Revenge*, by Brian Daley.



SISTER SVANGERD AND THE NOT QUITE DEAD

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

384 pages | Paperback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **KJ Parker**

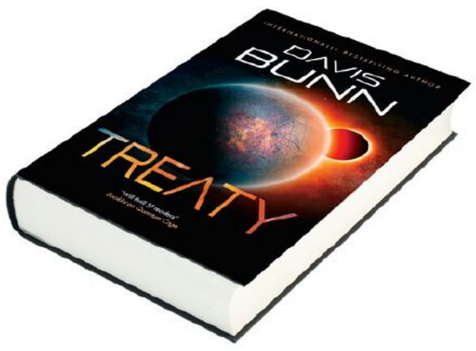
Publisher **Orbit**

It's hard to shake the notion that KJ Parker – Tom Holt writing under his preferred pseudonym – is a cynic. The protagonist of *Sister Svangerd* is not the titular nun who works as an assassin for the Holy Mother Church, but her mission partner Brother Desiderius. Dispatched to assassinate a troublesome princess, the pair become entangled with rival factions fighting to control the church, while delegates keep being murdered by Walkers – nigh-on indestructible revenants from Desiderius's homeland.

Brother Desiderius is a bundle of contradictions – an atheist with enthusiasm for doctrinal minutiae. The plot hinges on the threat of a schism within the church following the discovery of a set of rare scrolls.

Holt packs in references to sacred texts, yet Desiderius's scepticism keeps him emotionally remote. Although the author binds the monk to the conflict by linking him to the Walkers, there remains a flippancy in Desiderius's narration, even when his life is at stake.

The prose is fast-paced, but after the catechisms and killings, Svangerd and Desiderius emerge basically unchanged, suggesting they've survived a storm in a scriptural teacup. **David West**



TREATY

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 3 FEBRUARY

208 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Davis Bunn**

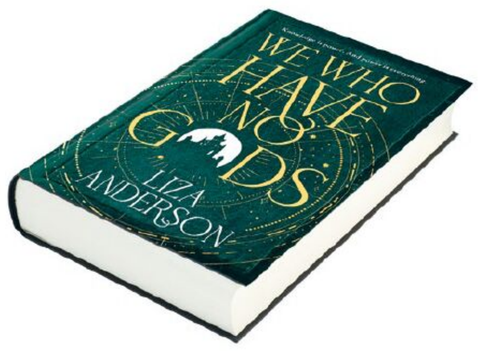
Publisher **Severn House**

Young Kirra Barret is smarter than most of the people around her. She has a mysterious connection to the usually weary flying creatures of her home, the planet of Treaty. She should be set for life, but in a stratified society she's also a lowly member of a mining clan. Opportunity will likely never knock. But then she's offered a chance to transcend her situation – if she's prepared to take a huge risk.

At the other end of the social spectrum, Eva Fourier, of the city of Florian's glitzy Second Ward, is about to become a secret agent working on behalf of the government. At a time when tension between humans and aliens will threaten an unjust status quo, the lives of the two will become entwined.

Its plot may lean towards SF staple, but *Treaty* is solidly entertaining if you're looking for a straightforward yarn that's not pushing at any stylistic or structural boundaries. Treaty, if not vividly drawn, is at least a believable locale. The main characters are intriguing enough, albeit rather generic. And there are some neat twists.

That said, author Davis Bunn is prolific, and a sense of haste repeatedly comes through. Too many scene-setting sentences meander because, clause heavy, they're constructed in a strange manner. A slim novel, but one that needed a much sharper edit. **Jonathan Wright**



WE WHO HAVE NO GODS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 29 JANUARY

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Liza Anderson**

Publisher **Bantam**

This debut novel from Liza Anderson is burdened with the most pretentious of titles, and worse, doesn't bring anything new to the already crowded Dark Academia genre. In fact, its characters and beats are so familiar that your reviewer had to keep checking she hadn't read it before.

The story follows Victoria Wood (no comment) as she looks out for her little brother Henry, who is a witch. Reluctantly bundling him off to a magical school, non-witch Vic goes to keep an eye on him – falling in lust with the school's Chief Sentinel, Xan, in the process. Naturally, there's also a Muggle-hating bad guy who's obsessed with her. Perhaps Vic has more magical ability than she realises?

As we accompany Vic through lessons, exposition dumps from other characters, and late-night explorations of the castle, it's all very gothic and compelling. Yet, not much happens – and even when things do, they rarely feel impactful. The sense of "I've read this before" hangs over every line, while the central romance feels bereft of sparks and even unnecessary.

That said, while this manuscript could have used a small kick up the bum before publication, it's dynamic enough to keep you glued if you're in the mood for something broody. **Jayne Nelson**



THE MONSTERS AT THE END OF THE WORLD

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

304 pages | Paperback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **Rebecca Orwin**

Publisher **Puffin**

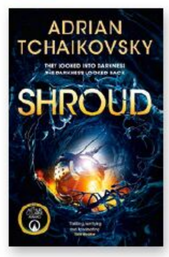
In a post-apocalyptic world – possibly somewhere in northern England, although we don't find out for sure – a small seaside town struggles to survive. Enclosed by poisoned land, their crops are on the verge of failing, which means that their only food source may soon have to come from the sea.

Unfortunately for the brave fisherfolk who sail out with their nets, the waves are patrolled by huge, deadly monsters who don't always let them return. Brought up to fear and hate these sea-beasts, young Sunny is in for a shock when she finds a baby monster caught in a snare. Torn between letting it die or saving it, she follows her heart, and an unlikely but adorable friendship is formed.

It's a simple premise with few surprises, but it's illustrated delightfully by Oriol Vidal (the "monster" looks like a cross between a cat and a seal: so cute!), and its message is one of love and acceptance; crucially, without being cloying. Debut author Rebecca Orwin has a firm hold of her characters, the world they live in and, most importantly, their humanity. Part fairy story, part *ET*, with a hint of Enid Blyton here and there, this is a heartwarming tale that should be placed in the hands of every schoolchild in the country. **Jayne Nelson**

REISSUES

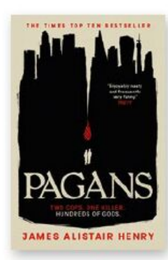
Our pick of the paperbacks is Adrian Tchaikovsky's first-contact tale **SHROUD** (★★★★★, out now, Tor),



which centres on a moon whose atmosphere is deadly to human life. After two women crash-land there, they find it teeming with life – most of it unfriendly... We said: "A pacy adventure that keeps you thinking... There's plenty of laser-focused satire on big business and questionable working practices." The paperback includes a prequel short story, "Sins Of The Children". Korean author Cheon Seon-ran's award-winning novel **A THOUSAND BLUES** (★★★★½, out now, Penguin) is set in a future where human jockeys have been replaced with robots, and sees two sisters



plotting to save the life of an ailing racehorse. We said: "The heartstring-tugging glimpses of a sad injured pony are cleverly layered with a multi-generational backstory about the impacts of technological change on people's lives." *Green Wing* writer James Alistair Henry's debut novel **PAGANS** (★★★★☆, 29 January, Moonflower) is a police procedural set in an alternate UK where the Norman invasion never happened. Set against a backdrop of talks to unite the Celtic West, Saxon East and Nordic Scotland, it sees two cops investigating the ritual murder of a Celtic



diplomat. We said: "An exercise in slipstream crime fiction more than good enough to give the likes of Ben Aaronovitch a run for their money." The paperback edition includes the first chapter of the upcoming sequel.

Reviews



VIGIL

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

192 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **George Saunders**

Publisher **Bloomsbury**

Lying on his deathbed, oil baron KJ Boone is in a state of denial. Honestly, despite numerous scientific studies, he knew nothing about the risks of global heating. And anyway, the world is better for his heroic contribution. Of course, he's not being truthful. Does a reckoning lie ahead?

As ghosts begin to gather around his bed, this may be the case. But if these restless spirits want to get to Boone, they will need to go through *Vigil*'s narrator, Jill "Doll" Blaine, whose role is to return to Earth to offer "comfort" to different charges as they pass into the afterlife. In contrast to Boone, Blaine lived a modest life, one cut cruelly short.

Does a soul as withered as that of Boone really deserve such compassion and care? Blaine, who sees herself as someone who's undergone a process of "elevation" that has given her greater empathy, a sense of connection with what's really important, certainly thinks so.

That's not to say we're asked to like Boone. Rather, in this spare and tightly edited novel(la), Booker-winning author George Saunders grapples with how we should view those who misuse corporate and, by inference, political power. It's an extraordinary book; the work of a modern master with a full-spectrum understanding of fantastic fiction. **Jonathan Wright**



NIGHTSHADE AND OAK

★★★½☆

RELEASED 3 FEBRUARY

304 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Molly O'Neill**

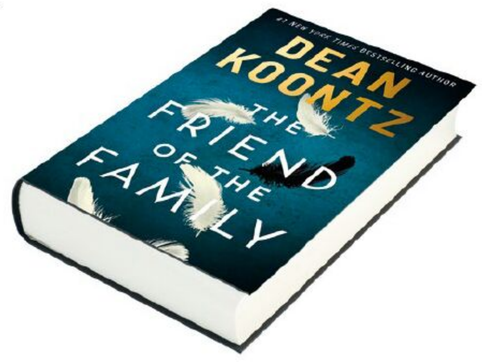
Publisher **Orbit**

Molly O'Neill's debut novel *Greenteeth* was full of the folklore and mythology of the British Isles, and the author's affection for the source material shone through. Her second, though set hundreds of years before, burns with that love.

The Nightshade of the title is Mallt Y Nos, a goddess charged with helping souls move on towards the afterworld, Annwn. The Oak is Belis, daughter of queen Boudica. But Boudica is dead, while Belis's sister Cati is trapped near death, her soul departed from her still-living body. The same spell has taken Mallt's powers, leaving her human and mortal – and souls of the island unshepherded. Mallt and Belis travel to Annwn to attempt to release Cati and regain Mallt's powers.

This queer romance/road trip novel travels the roads and footpaths of ancient Britain, taking in witches, wights and Roman centurions. Mallt's struggles with her human body are affecting and amusing. She also struggles with human emotions, taking too long to realise just how devastated Belis really is.

Their journey isn't over when they reach Annwn, however, and as the two move from one mini quest to the next, the book starts to feel a little stale. But there's a satisfying resolution, and it's an entertaining journey through the hedgerows. **Rhian Drinkwater**



THE FRIEND OF THE FAMILY

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

380 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Dean Koontz**

Publisher **Thomas & Mercer**

Dean Koontz may be best known as a genre-crossing thriller writer, but his latest novel offers something different: a fairy tale-like magic realist fable set against '20s and '30s Hollywood.

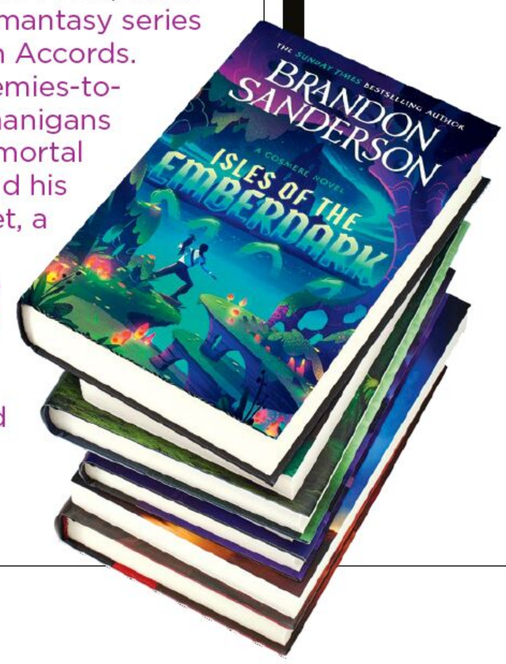
It's the story of Alida, a side-show "freak" with a beautiful face but a twisted body, who's rescued from exploitation by a film-producing husband and wife. They integrate her into their family, who accept her enthusiastically. They also discover that Alida has an eidetic memory and can perfectly quote from any book she's ever read. Later, Alida discovers another ability that could even more profoundly affect her new family.

This is an endearingly odd book that's almost devoid of tension or suspense until near the end. Alida's life at times seems so advantageously feted that you start wondering if she's an unreliable narrator who's making it all up. But no, she does indeed have a bizarre but wonderful life rubbing shoulders with Hollywood royalty and enriching the lives of her siblings, while reflecting on the power of fiction to mould minds.

It is twee and unrealistically idealistic. It's also charming and unapologetically life-affirming; the sort of thing you'd expect if Pixar ever adapted *Anne Of Green Gables*. **Dave Golder**

ALSO OUT

ISLES OF THE EMBERDARK (3 February, Gollancz) is Brandon Sanderson's latest "secret project", set in his Cosmere universe. Incorporating and building upon 2014 novella *Sixth Of The Dusk*, it centres on a trapper whose Aviar companions (supernatural birds) are the target of alien invaders, and a young dragon stuck in human form, leader of a starship crew of misfits. "*Outlander* meets Camelot" is the sell for Paula Lafferty's **THE ONCE AND FUTURE QUEEN** (29 January, Hodder & Stoughton). Its protagonist, Vera, is whisked away from her life cleaning in a Glastonbury hotel to seventh-century Camelot by a guest who reveals himself as Merlin – and insists that she is Guinevere. Jim Butcher's The Dresden Files has an eighteenth instalment. In **TWELVE MONTHS** (out now, Orbit) Harry Dresden must deal with ghouls, a betrothal to a deadly vampire, and the fact that his brother's dying. The Laundry Files, Charles Stross's satirical horror series about a supernatural espionage service, is wrapping up with book 14. In **THE REGICIDE REPORT** (out now, Orbit), Bob Howard and Mo O'Brien are pressed into service to protect the Queen from assassination after the Elder God installed as Prime Minister decides she's a threat to his power. Finally, Elizabeth May's **THE WOLF AND THE CROWN OF BLOOD** (out now, Daphne Press) kicks off dark romantasy series The Broken Accords. Expect enemies-to-lovers shenanigans with an immortal assassin and his latest target, a princess born to die repeatedly, sacrificed and resurrected to appease the gods.



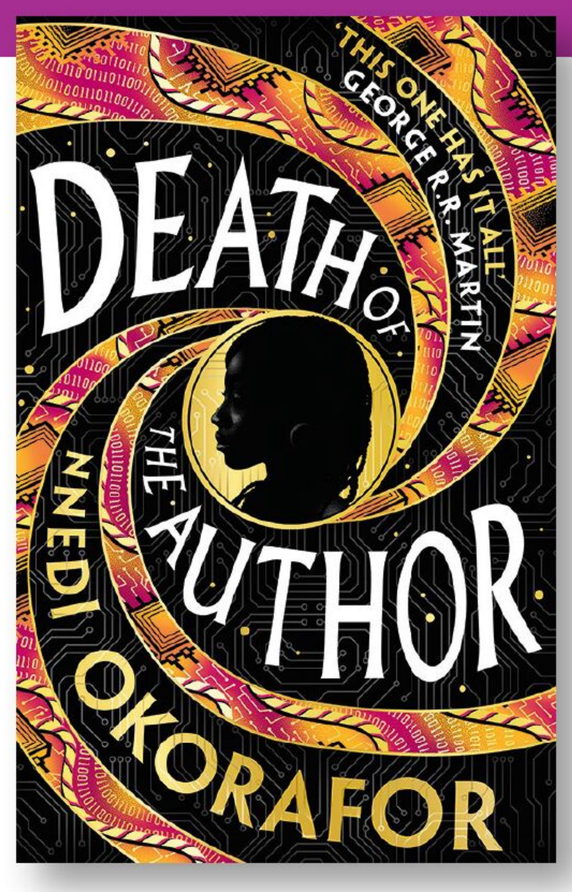
THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Nnedi Okorafor

The "Naijamerican" author is the proud owner of a teeny-tiny library



MARK PETERMAN



What is your daily writing routine like?

I'm a morning person. I get up, meditate, give my cats some attention, check my emails and mess around on social media, then settle down and write for as many hours as I feel like writing. This can be two hours, and it can be seven. It depends. Nothing is rigid. Most of the time, I don't even know what I'll work on. However, I'm effortlessly consistent and highly disciplined. Around 5pm, I hit the gym. And if it's on one of the two days I take off per week, I go for a two-and-half-mile walk to my local mountain. Then I return to my desk in the evening and write a little more... if I feel like it. It's all very loose.

Do you have any personal mementos within reach?

On my desk are trinkets, statues and objects gathered from around the world, from Nigeria to South Africa to the UAE to Oman to Brazil to the ocean. There's a wind-up witch, baoding balls, a green porcelain duck from my daughter, a Mezmoglobe, a tennis ball, a metal praying mantis from my DAW editor. I like a lot of... company on my desk.

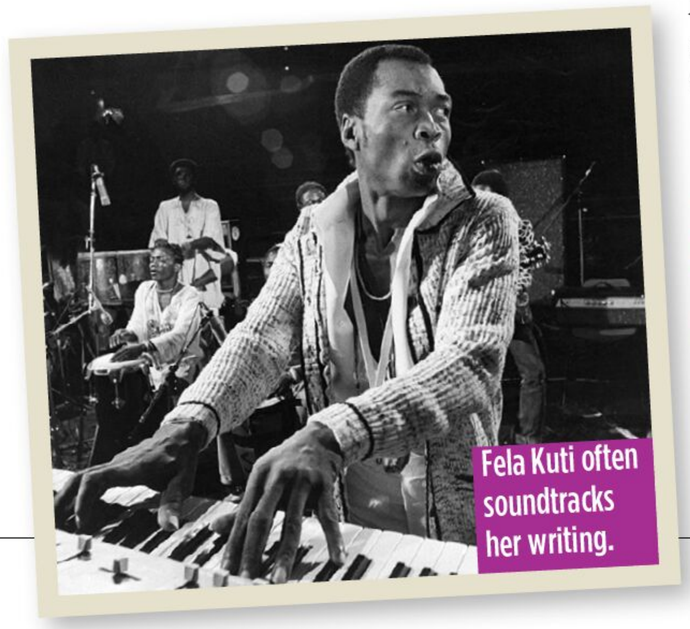
Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?

If I'm writing, I can listen to music but it can't be anything that distracts. Yacht rock and classic rock from the '70s have good atmosphere without being distracting. I also enjoy listening to Fela [Kuti]. There are times when I'll listen to something specific as a direct soundtrack to what I'm writing. But, honestly, I prefer having a movie I've watched a million times playing in the background. I also like silence.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

I started to write *Who Fears Death* because of my father's passing. And I started to write *Death Of The Author* because of my sister Ngozi's passing. Each of these carries the pain, grief, shock and aftershock of those devastating milestones. Pouring all that out was cathartic, but also tough to do.

> **"Pouring all that out was cathartic, but also tough"**



Fela Kuti often soundtracks her writing.

MEHNER/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY

Were you a keen reader as a child?

I was an avid reader. When I wasn't on the tennis court, I was in the library. Some of my earliest favourites included *Comet In Moominland*, *The Changeover*, *Bunnicula*, *Miranty And The Alchemist*, the Olga da Polga books, *Strega Nona*, *Liza Lou And The Yeller Belly Swamp*, *The Grumpus Under The Rug*, and a whole bunch of Isaac Asimov's non-fiction books on space.

Recommend one book that you love that's not very well known.

I Saw The Sky Catch Fire by T Obinkaram Echewa. I see it as the perfect companion to [Chinua Achebe's] *Things Fall Apart*, because as Igbo male perspectives are centred in *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo women's perspectives are centred during a similar time period in this novel. It's a book I return to often.

What's the best gift you've received from a reader?

A tiny box with miniature versions of almost all of my books in it. I keep this minuscule library on the stand beside my desk.

What's the most frustrating thing about being an author?

Enduring strangers who have never spoken a word to me boldly stating untrue things about me, packaged in the inflammatory language of outrage and delivered to droves of people eager to believe those things for whatever reason. Then not being able to say anything back because to speak merely pours fuel on gasoline. What fun... not. If you're visible, vocal, active, authentic and confident, especially as a black woman author, you're going to catch bullets at some point.

Death Of The Author is out in paperback now, from Gollancz.

First Read
AN EXTRACT FROM A BOOK

Dance Of

A season of peace is the finest time to plant the seeds of war

The second instalment of Gourav Mohanty's Indian-inspired epic, grimdark fantasy series – The Raag Of Rta. "Like *Game Of Thrones* in an Indian universe" – Dan Jones

PROLOGUE

Some soldiers forsake their oaths by fleeing the battlefield, some by unlatching the gates, others by seducing a superior's darling, but only the chosen commit treason by accidentally pissing on their king.

"They're ready, Sir," whispered Asun.

Marshal Ethari withdrew his whistle and wiped it. Felt like the hygienic thing to do. "I'm aware, soldier," he said, hoping he had infused some nonchalance into his tone. Nonchalance, after all, earned a Marshal respect, or so his mother reminded him every day while she violently combed his unruly curls. "I can hear them," he added for good measure.

Judging by the noise behind him, there was a considerable number of spectators who'd been lured to the battlements – a considerable number that was steadily rising. It put Ethari in the mind of the mob's uproar back in the Day of Exodus: Seven Tribes, hundreds of voices raised in delighted devilry as they bid farewell to Iyran Machil forever. Wonder if they'd survived. Wonder if they were up to something better than overseeing a piss-the-farthest contest.

Ethari would have very much liked to follow the Seven Tribes out. They were bravehearts who refused to live any longer as ageless refugees in this realm and returned to the Surface at great peril. He wasn't without sympathy for their cause, after all. However, he didn't fancy the idea of drowning, either. Not to forget he had sworn an oath to the Realmseer. Not to King Manu directly, of course, but, you know, he'd sworn it even so. He had been happy to swear it when he was rescued from the great flood, and supposed it would be rather unsporting to unswear it now simply because he was bored. What kind of a Vachan would it be then? His superior had assured him last week that Manu promised a new beginning, a new world where they would want to eat again. He missed eating. You never truly appreciate how negotiable starvation is until you've spent a few centuries without an appetite.

"Sir?" Asun asked.

Disturbed from his contemplations on digestion, Ethari glanced at his men and women spread thin along the walls of Iyran Machil. What a flimsy little blue line they cut. Perhaps thirty archers and ten spearthrowers. All useless. The wall was barely high enough for a fall to end in a fracture. Not the architect's fault, of course. Who do you defend the city walls from when your city is the only settlement in the realm?

Bored, Ethari whistled without overseeing.

With a hearty cry, he let forth the first stream. His comrades, not to be outdone, followed suit, and soon enough, like feeble spigots in a garden, waters of sunlit hues streamed down the battlements to the ground below. A windkeeper, captained by the Archmarshal, hovered in the air above – judge and jury of this ungodly contest. Someday Ethari would be up there in the sky, judging the arc of pees himself. *Any decade now*.

Meanwhile, the mirror clouds above the windkeeper cast their gaze on the wall in grand detail. Oh, how he loathed those clouds! Especially when they conspired to reflect his face, enlarged and uncomfortably close, as though the heavens themselves were holding a looking glass to his soul. It might have been tolerable if these clouds reflected the truth but he was firmly convinced that mischievous sprites lurked in the sky, who spun mirages of the mind, twisting and distorting reality. See, even now there drifted a mirror cloud, its reflections mimicking his every move until they showed him tumbling headlong off the walls.

A scream caused him to drop his whistle to the ground. The symphony of splashes from the bladder brigade now interrupted, some of the contestants turned about in alarm, startling and showering their supporters behind instead. He, on the other hand, stuffed it inside his trousers, a growing patch of dark on the crotch the only evidence of his folly. But Ethari was past caring, his mouth turning dry as he deciphered the contents of the scream. His jaw, along with his trousers, dropped simultaneously when he confirmed it from the reflection on the sky.

They'd been relieving themselves on Manu, the Realmseer, their King, the Father of Mankind, by whose name the entire human race was now known. And Ethari had allowed this to pass.

Difficult though it was for him to admit, Ethari was having a hard time staying nonchalant. On the contrary, he was on the brink of squealing for his mother. He hadn't been trained for this. They don't train you for what to do if you accidentally douse your probably unconscious, probably sleeping, hopefully dead king with urine. Does he run? Does he call for help? Does he blame someone else? Does he blame Asun for rushing him to whistle?

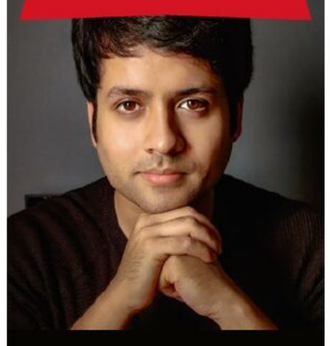
Almost as if running out of time to decide, Ethari went with the evidently self-incriminating choice. "On me! To the Realmseer!" His soldiers glanced at each other, stirring uncomfortably, but to their credit and his relief, they followed him down the steps.

Ethari heard the Realmseer before he saw him. Heard his heartbeat to be precise. How could he hear the Realmseer's heartbeat from such a distance! Was it his own? But the sound of the Realmseer's heart faded in Ethari's ears when his eyes saw the Realmseer's body.

Manu was lying face down. Wheezing and leaking red all over, his hair, his back, his arse, all seemed damp. Ethari hesitated, whispered a prayer, and then delicately turned his king over, and fell back in horror.

Arteries bulged out on Manu's face, much like they did on his sculptures. The Orb of Agan

The Author



Gourav Mohanty was born, and currently lives, in Bhubaneswar, the City of Temples. A connoisseur of mythologies and momos, he's been certified as a nerd ever since he graduated as a gold medalist from law school. He keeps things interesting by daylighting as a lawyer, moonlighting as a stand-up comic and gaslighting as a storyteller.

Shadows

by Gourav Mohanty

Mian, carved into a hole in the centre of the king's forehead, glimmered weakly, its shine dimmed. But it was Manu's eyes that petrified Ethari. Strange golden specks in his brown eyes, starlike, were merging into each other even as Ethari observed them.

Ethari had never seen Manu in such close proximity but he did not need prior intimacy with his king to know something had gone horribly wrong. Was it because of the piss? The specks in his eyes were the same colour as it! *Oh Mother, I'm dead.*

'Summon the windkeeper!' Ethari snarled. "Now, you bastards!"

Ow! Ethari rubbed his eyes. Perfect. Just the time for dust to make its entrance. Now his eyes would turn red, and his soldiers would think he was weeping. Of course, Ethari wanted to but he wasn't. He will be damned if he let his underlings see him so. Fucking ingrates that they were. Pissing off the walls! What kind of a soldier does that? Now he'll be blamed for their bladders!

While thoughts of fairness raged in the poor Marshal's head, the windkeeper descended. A heavily robed healer pranced out, followed by the Archmarshal.

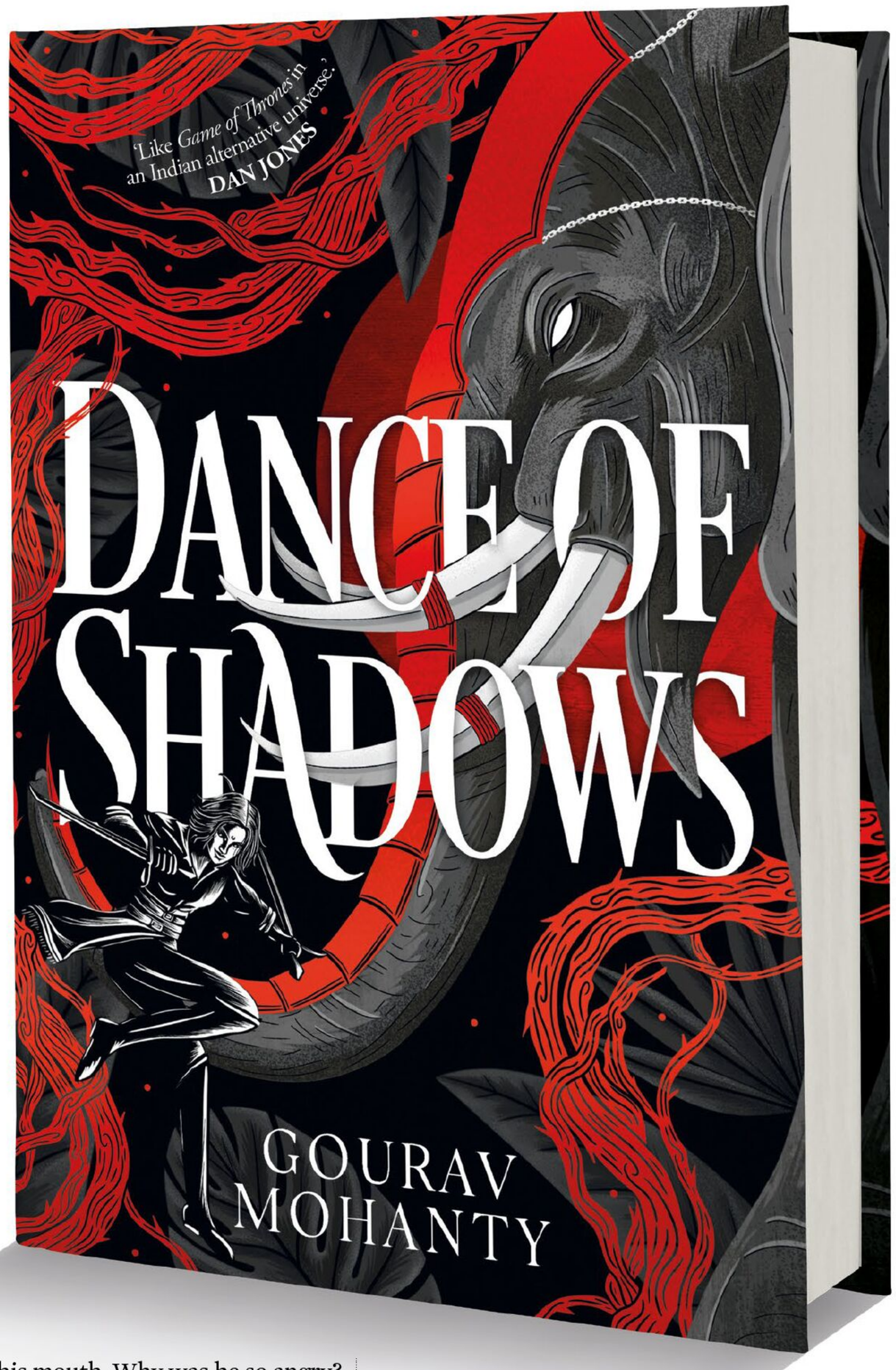
"Report," the Archmarshal, a short, diminutive woman with two slim swords peeking over her shoulder, commanded. The little fucker. Kaksi, her name was. Ethari would have followed the Realmseer into hell. But not this arsehole, this bitch with her wooden fragrances, her fine accent and her nonchalant jaw. *Why am I so... angry?* That question was, however, buried by the knowledge that he was glaring back at the Archmarshal.

But before the Archmarshal could take offence, the healer spoke. "Clots in the blood vessels leading to his mind. He should've perished... but the Orb of Agan Mian, or perhaps the poison of Velas Kalein, is stopping him from—"

"Do you want to climb to the battlements and announce your lack of knowledge to the world?" Ethari barked, not believing the words coming out of his mouth. Why was he so angry? And why did his eyes hurt so? He turned back and looked down to find Kaksi nodding at him.

"We will take the Realmseer to his palace," Kaksi ordered.

In this suspended state between sickness and health, Manu was carried by Kaksi and her men onto the windkeeper. The engines roared to life. Soon it would ascend over the walls of Iyran Machil, passing the floating mirrors and the flying D'rahis, to take the cloud street straight to the palace. Not once did Kaksi look down to thank Ethari. If she had, she might've saved herself from his dire fate. She might've even saved this world.



Author's Note

The events of *Dance Of Shadows* take place alongside those in *Sons Of Darkness*, like a shadow trailing a particularly dramatic hero. So if you're reading this and wondering, "Wait, didn't I already hear about that battle?" – congratulations, dear traveller, you've been paying attention. You see, while the main cast was busy waving swords, making speeches, and doing their level best to destroy the world, far more sinister deeds were unfolding just beyond the edge of sight. *Dance Of Shadows* is that story, the one beyond the veil, the one where vengeance sets sail. – Gourav Mohanty

Read more in Dance Of Shadows, the second instalment in Gourav Mohanty's The Raag Of Rta series, paperback out now.

POWERS 25

SFX Loves

Cops and capes

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

- Publisher **Dark Horse Comics**
- Writer **Brian Michael Bendis**
- Artist **Michael Avon Oeming**

ISSUES 1-5 **Pitting a band of** human operatives against various superhuman adversaries (in this case, homicide detectives who investigate the murder of caped crusaders) *Powers* forged a template that was later emulated by the likes of *The Boys* – arguably to greater success, at least when it comes to small-screen adaptations.

Now, after a five-year break, Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Avon Oeming have reunited for *Powers*' 25th anniversary on this enthralling new series. But rather than resting on their laurels, they're introducing two new lead characters in Detective Iris Kutter – whose father was a rookie cop who memorably got his head literally blown off live on TV in a past issue – and Moebius Moon, significantly the first actual Power to ever join Powers Division.

Not that the previous cast are entirely conspicuous by their absence. Former main protagonist (and now Captain) Deena Pilgrim is currently confined to desk duties until one of her lost police badges is found at a crime scene, while her erstwhile partner's name is given to the Christian Walker Powers Act, which controversially allows all Powers to essentially govern themselves. There are also plenty of fun callbacks, with Deena, Walker and even the original Retro Girl – the subject of 2000's debut *Powers* series – showing up in issue three, which is dedicated almost entirely to Moebius's intriguing backstory.

With Moebius not even appearing until issue two's final page, Bendis takes his sweet time assembling the key components of this opening 12-part storyline, which five issues in are finally starting to fall into place. Beginning with the discovery of a mysterious corpse that apparently has a portal to another dimension where its face once was, it soon escalates into a conspiracy by the Tyrell Corporation-style Legacy Star Lab – whose suitably *Blade Runner*-esque HQ is evocatively depicted by Oeming – and its founder Dr Archie Gates (maybe named after a certain software developer) to assume control of Powers Division itself.

Bringing to mind a manga-inspired Alex Toth, Oeming's art combines fluid figurework with dynamic layouts, and while he usually sticks to a variation of the standard nine-panel grid, he occasionally cuts loose, such as with issue one's bravura opening double-page spread of a super-sized superhero having fallen devastatingly to Earth.

> **"Rather than resting on their laurels, new characters are introduced"**

Impressively, his panels never look overcrowded, despite Bendis's often dense but sharp and witty dialogue; credit must also go to letterer Joshua Reed. He's assisted by colourist Nick Filardi, who adopts a limited palette of varying, sombre shades, which serve to enhance the story's gritty, noir-esque qualities.

All power to Bendis and Oeming, as this is an anniversary event that celebrates the past while also pointing to the future.

Stephen Jewell

i Bendis was partly inspired to create Retro Girl by reading a biography of Janis Joplin – that's why her real name is Janis.





THE LEGEND TESTERS

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

- Publisher **Rebellion**
- Writer **Graham Baker**
- Artist **Jordi Bernet**

COLLECTION **Meet Rollo Stones** and Danny Charters, daring adventurers from a 40th century where chaps still smoke pipes. Employed as fact-checkers, they use time travel to zap themselves into history and test the veracity of assorted myth-encrusted museum exhibits. As a sharply observed speech bubble has it, "Wow! What a weird way to earn a living!"

Originally serialised in the pages of British weekly *Smash!* in 1966, this pulpy strip predates TV's *The Time Tunnel* by five months, but shares the setup of a time-hopping male duo – not to mention a concentric swirl to represent fourth-dimensional travel. It's also many orders of magnitude crazier than even the mind of Irwin Allen could conjure.

Take the first story, "Death Castle", a full-fat gothic affair that finds room for werewolves, vampires, cannibalistic trolls, a giant rat and such macabre touches as a bowl of blood soup, served up in a sinister castle. "There is evil abroad here! I can smell it in the very air!" declares one of our heroes. Not exactly the scientific method, granted, but he's not wrong.

Other tales take in everything from Greek myths to ape overlords, each exploit as breathlessly plotted as the last, all drawn in what artist Jordi Bernet's intro modestly calls his "somewhat convincing style".

Nick Setchfield



THE ADVENTURES OF LUMEN N

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **Dark Horse Comics**

Writer **James Robinson**

Artist **Phil Hester**

ISSUES 1-4 **"Victorian** adventure fiction crossover" was never a concept that was going to be left alone for long, and *The Adventures Of Lumen N* is daring to pick up the baton left by *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, but in a much lighter and more child-friendly manner.

This four-issue miniseries (planned to be the first of an ongoing saga) follows the titular Lumen, a young Indian girl in 1901 who discovers she's the granddaughter of legendary mariner Captain Nemo. Forced on the run with Nemo, she's swept up into an adventure that sees her having to save Paris from the plans of the villainous Robur the Conqueror.

Veteran comics writer James Robinson is clearly having a lot of fun here, and he's backed up by energetic art and creative design from Phil Hester. Visually, this is a bright and accessible comic that pulls off a selection of well-crafted set-pieces, while also creating a lush and lurid steampunk-influenced world.

However, Robinson's haphazard pacing leaves it feeling as if a children's adventure novel has been crammed into the smallest possible space. There isn't enough room for the quieter, more emotional moments to land, leaving this feeling too much like a breathless synopsis rather than a satisfying story in its own right. **Saxon Bullock**



Kirk embraced the comfort of tracksuit bottoms.

STAR TREK: THE LAST STARSHIP

Captain Comeback

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **IDW**

Writers **Collin Kelly, Jackson Lanzing**

Artist **Adrián Bonilla**

ISSUES 1-3 **IDW's previous** ongoing title drew its cast from across the various *Star Trek* eras, but Captain James T Kirk is the only classic character resurrected for their latest monthly book, brought back to life 700 years after his original passing.

After the awe and wonder of *Star Trek*, *The Last Starship* is set in considerably less optimistic times, right at the start of The Burn, the cataclysmic galaxy-wide event which, as the crew of USS Discovery later found, rendered dilithium inert, destroying countless warp drive vessels.

The first three issues form a neat introductory storyline, and despite featuring prominently on the covers, Kirk initially assumes a lesser role in the first two, as the narrative instead focuses on the efforts of Captain Delacourt Sato to rally what is left of Starfleet. As he sets forth in the titular last starship, the USS Omega, writers Collin Kelly and Jackson Lanzing throw Klingons, the Gorn and most promisingly the Borg – who are now a more democratic collective, and responsible for Kirk's revival – into the mix.

Aided by Heather Moore's sombre colours, Adrián Bonilla's atmospheric, David Mazzucchelli-style artwork really fits the darker material, although he also draws some spectacular battles. While we could have done without the occasional text pages interrupting the action, issue three ends with a poignant nod to the past that also points to the future, as Kirk finally takes command. It'll be interesting to see where this title boldly goes from here. **Stephen Jewell**

i Captain Kirk also made a cameo appearance in the final issue of IDW's recent *Star Trek: Red Shirts* miniseries.



CUL-DE-SAC

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **Bad Idea**

Writer **Mike Carey**

Artist **Jonathan Wayshak**

ISSUES 1-6 **With issue one's** references to Anne Rice and Stephenie Meyer, Mike Carey perhaps acknowledges he's on familiar territory with this six-parter, although its recently orphaned young protagonists are actually Necratil – apex predators who feed off other species, including bloodsuckers.

The vampire classic *Cul-De-Sac* most resembles is Kathryn Bigelow's 1987 film *Near Dark*. The story takes the form of a road movie as the kids, drawn from three families, hit the highway, pursued both by the vampire hunters who murdered their respective parents and by a vampiric Federal agent turned ferocious bat lady, all either knowingly or unknowingly in the employ of Mafia-style vampire clans.

This is perhaps Carey's most straightforwardly horror series. He doesn't stint on the gore, and stages several thrilling set-pieces, all of which are depicted with grisly detail by Jonathan Wayshak. Owing much to Bill Sienkiewicz, Wayshak's expressive, surreal art captures the escalating emotions with its exaggerated facial expressions and deft use of colour. The grainy newsprint paper stock adds to the pulpy feel.

While it would have been interesting to explore the lore of the Necratil further, Carey neatly balances some heartfelt familial moments with a blood-soaked final battle that leaves much unresolved for the inevitable sequel. **Stephen Jewell**

Reviews



THE PHANTOM

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **Mad Cave Studios**

Writer **Ray Fawkes**

Artist **Russell Olson**

ISSUES 1-4 **While The Ghost**

Who Walks' adventures are published regularly in countries such as Australia and Sweden, this is the first US Phantom monthly for over a decade.

While Ray Fawkes's script emphasises The Phantom's status as a legendary fighter who apparently never dies, it's a shame that he doesn't tap into the intergenerational aspect, as hinted at in last year's Free Comic Book Day issue, and the fact that there have been many Phantoms, dating back centuries.

Instead Fawkes serves up a routine if still thrilling plot that would better suit The Punisher, as the Phantom's home village in fictional East African nation Bangalla is invaded by ruthless drug smugglers, who initially at least are unaware that it's under his protection, as he operates stealthily in the shadows.

Considering changes in attitudes towards colonialism since The Phantom debuted in 1936, it's refreshing to see Guran, son of the Bandar people's ailing chief, gaining some agency as he battles wits with chief gangster Asif Singh, although current Phantom Kit Walker's wife Diana is largely a bystander to what unfolds.

With his fluid linework resembling both Chris Samnee and Phantom creator Lee Falk, Russell Olson imbues his pulpy artwork with a contemporary edge. With this first arc concluding with issue five, let's hope *The Phantom* explores more challenging territory in future. **Stephen Jewell**



Many of us get hangry in the middle of the afternoon...

PREDATOR KILLS THE MARVEL UNIVERSE

Blood and Spandex

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **Marvel Comics**

Writer **Benjamin Percy**

Artists **Marcelo Ferreira, Daniel Picciotto, Brent Peeples**

ISSUES 1-5 **Sometimes spinoff** comics can go in unpredictable directions (like 2024/25's *Aliens vs Avengers*), but most will settle for exactly what's expected, like Marvel's latest outing with the *Predator* franchise.

This five-issue miniseries follows in the footsteps of *Deadpool Kills The Marvel Universe*, but it's also the climax of a story arc running through recent *Predator* comics in which the alien Yautja warriors battled Wolverine, Spider-Man and Black Panther.

The basic set-up is that the Yautja have decided to invade Earth to transform it into their own exclusive hunting ground. The Predators soon launch a devastating worldwide attack, murdering the majority of Marvel's heroes, and it's up to a small band of survivors to fight back.

The emphasis here is on delivering over-the-top set-pieces of classic Marvel characters being killed in gruesome ways. Writer Benjamin Percy pulls off a couple of tense sequences, but most of this is repetitive ultraviolence that wears out its welcome in record time.

The functional art only manages a handful of arresting moments, and the script fumbles the inherent coolness of the Predator as a movie monster, turning the Yautja into a bland horde of minions taking advice from (of all people) Kraven the Hunter.

Admittedly, the story is never pretending to be anything other than dumb, violent spectacle, but even on these terms, this is a flat, mostly lacklustre spinoff unlikely to stick in the memory. **Saxon Bullock**

i Benjamin Percy's 2023 novella *American Criminal* is being developed as a movie, with Gavin O'Connor attached to direct.



THE TWILIGHT ZONE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Publisher **IDW Publishing**

Writers **Dan Watters, Tom Scioli, James Stokoe**

Artists **Morgan Beem, Tom Scioli, James Stokoe**

ISSUES 1-3 **Sixty-seven years** after its first broadcast, *The Twilight Zone* remains hugely influential television, and now IDW are having a go at reviving the mood and style of the legendarily spooky anthology.

This five-issue series presents five self-contained tales from different comic creators, each one illustrated in black and white (echoing the original show), and each one aiming to deliver an impactful concept. There's also a distinctly indie-comic vibe to the chosen creators, giving it an offbeat, characterful atmosphere.

We're now three issues in, and while the trio of tales so far don't reach the heights of the show's best episodes, they're certainly worthy of attention. Writer/artist Tom Scioli pulls off some typically kooky retro sci-fi in issue two's "A World Of Your Wildest Dreams", while writer/artist James Stokoe showcases his kinetic visual style in issue three's mythic, action-packed "The Relic".

While these tales struggle to land their final twists, the highlight is issue one's "Blanks" by Dan Watters and Morgan Beem, in which an attempt to reset the ageing process goes horribly wrong. It's here that this miniseries gets closest to capturing the original show's blend of science fiction and morality play. Hopefully the remaining two issues will explore the same weird and intriguing territory. **Saxon Bullock**

DOCTOR WHO

War And Peace

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!/3 FEB**
- Running time **60 minutes/49 minutes**
- Format **CD and download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Things are looking** bleak for the Thirteenth Doctor. In **Ride Or Die** ★★★½☆ the Doctor and Yaz find themselves caught up in a future war on a battle-scarred world. Also along for the ride is Megan Miller (Lauren O'Leary), one of Yaz's former police colleagues.

Rochana Patel's character-led script interrogates Yaz's relationship to both the Doctor and her own sexuality, giving Mandip Gill some really strong material to work with. The A-plot is less effective, with Megan's cheerfully gung-ho attitude a peculiar response to being conscripted into a nightmarish conflict on another planet, but it all builds to a satisfying and smart conclusion that emphasises the themes at the heart of the story.

> **"It all builds to a satisfying and smart conclusion"**

Big Finish's Ninth Doctor and Rose audios have, so far, stayed close to home, with the first three stories all taking place on the Powell Estate. **Cloud Eight** ★★★★☆ finally travels further afield, though in keeping with Russell T Davies's early pitch that *Doctor Who* should always link back to the human race, the story takes place above the Earth in the floating city of High High Wycombe. It's the "Second Dark Age" of mankind – but everyone seems content in their jobless and seemingly-utopian society. Something is clearly very wrong...

Stewart Pringle and Lauren Mooney's ambitious script starts off in familiar territory before slipping into something more surreal than the TV show would have attempted in the Eccleston era. It's good, weird stuff, with a strong guest cast in Felicity Cant and Charlie Condou. **Will Salmon**



Ride Or Die introduces new character The Tourist, who looks set to be an ongoing threat for the Thirteenth Doctor range.

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

Something In My House

★★★★☆

- **RUNNING UNTIL 25 APRIL**
- Venue **Ambassadors Theatre, London**
- Production company **Melting Pot**

STAGE PLAY **The theatre is plunged** into darkness. An innovative soundscape fills your ears as you adjust to the tension that builds as the seconds tick by. Is that breathing you hear your own, another patron, or... something else?

Paranormal Activity – based on the soon-to-be-revived movie franchise – plays all kinds of tricks on your eyes and ears, not least because you'll struggle to believe some of these things are actually happening live on stage in front of you, and not in a carefully edited film.

That said, no prior knowledge of any previous instalments is required – this new tale is just a good, old-fashioned ghost story through and through.

A married couple relocate from the USA to Britain, but the bleak feelings and visions that plague Lou (Melissa James) persist. Husband James (Patrick Heusinger) doesn't seem overly sympathetic, nor understanding, until strange things start happening in their new home and, more specifically, to him.

The staging – a house set on two levels – will have your eyes darting around nervously, searching for signs of life (or afterlife), often fuelled by audience reactions. The shared experience is a key factor, with gasps and shrieks shredding whatever nerves you have left. It's no wonder that the same audience rewards the exceptional illusions with frenzied applause – which you sense is also masking a sigh of relief...


"You know, I've always held a torch for you."

A slow-burner initially, it builds to a terrifying climax to act one, after which point it doesn't really let up. To say more would be heading into spoiler territory, but audience members were seen either shaking their heads, or hiding them, in disbelief at the physical effects playing out in front of them.

It's a production that blends exceptional sound and lighting design with some truly scary visuals. We could well see another long-running spine-chiller settling into London's West End.

Darren Scott

Illusions designer Chris Fisher previously worked on *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* and *The Hunger Games: On Stage*.

JULY 1999

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**



Heather Donahue became the face of fear.

LANDMARK MEDIA/ALAMY

FLASHBACK

Wood You Believe It?

14 JULY 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* was far from the first horror movie to splice its chills from found footage. In 1980, *Cannibal Holocaust* fabricated filmed evidence of a doomed expedition into the Amazon, while *The Last Broadcast* beat it into cinemas by a year, presenting a goosebumping quest for the fabled Jersey Devil with the same shaky, lo-fi aesthetic that defined the camcorder boom of the '90s.

Indie filmmakers Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez took their inspiration from the paranormal documentaries that had so deliciously unsettled them as children: *Chariots Of The Gods* (1970), *The Legend Of Boggy Creek* (1972), and Leonard Nimoy's *In Search Of...* series, which brought Vulcan gravitas to everything from the Bermuda Triangle to killer bees.

The Blair Witch is named Elly Kedward – a play on 16th century English occultist Edward Kelley.

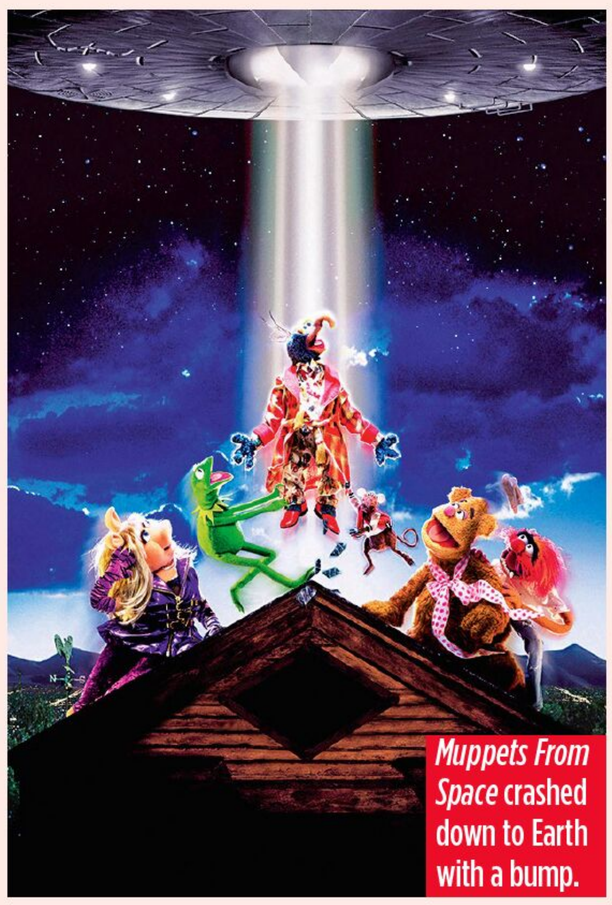
"It was their 'reality based' format that creeped us out as kids," Myrick said in 1999. "Ed and I wanted to capture that same primal scare within a more contemporary film."

The pair had conceived the project in 1993 while film students in Florida. A casting call for actors with strong improv skills netted over 2000 applicants; three were selected for eight days of principal photography on the Greenway Trail in Montgomery County, Maryland. Twenty hours of footage was carved into a tight 82 minutes of raw, vérité-style dread, complete with restless camerawork, blurred motion and unforgiving shots up petrified nostrils.

The plot may have concerned itself with the dark legacy of an 18th-century Appalachian sorceress, but *The Blair Witch Project* was haunted by Hollywood's future. Many regard it as the first movie to truly go viral, exploding across a still novel internet.

Was it fact or fiction? Documentary or drama? A crafty marketing campaign sought to fudge the issue. The film's phenomenally popular website forged police reports, while early promotional material listed cast members Heather Donahue, Michael C Williams and Joshua Leonard as either "missing" or "deceased". The Sci-Fi Channel aired promotional tie-in *Curse Of The Blair Witch*, piling mockumentary on mockumentary.

"We are not here to pull a hoax," Myrick confessed on the film's release, "but we want the mythology to *feel* real rather than *be* real."



Muppets From Space crashed down to Earth with a bump.

Gonzo Cinema

14 JULY 1999 There has always been a streak of sci-fi among the riotous felt and foam rubber of the Muppetverse. *The Muppet Show* brought us the voyages of the USS Swinetrek in regular skit Pigs In Space, while *Sesame Street*'s ace reporter Kermit filed regular dispatches from the deranged world of Koozebane.

Tapping a zeitgeist shaped by *The X-Files* and *Independence Day*, *Muppets From Space* embraced that *SFX*-friendly undercurrent and shot it into orbit. The sixth big-screen outing for Jim Henson's creations finds resident curly-beaked daredevil Gonzo suffering an identity crisis: tired of being classified as a "whatever", he goes in search of his origins, convinced the answers lie in the stars. Pursued by the US government and held in an Area 51-style facility, Gonzo ultimately confronts his own species in a close encounter of the furred kind.

Directed by *SpongeBob Squarepants* co-creator Tim Hill – replacing *Grease*'s Randal Kleiser, reportedly dismissed for lacking sufficient vision – *Muppets From Space* met mixed reviews and grossed $22.3 million against a budget of $24 million.

"I don't think the last movie was up to what it should have been," said Muppet-wrangling veteran Frank Oz in 2000. Even Kermit has distanced himself from the film that grounded the franchise as a box-office proposition for a decade. Promoting 2011's cinematic comeback *The Muppets*, the contrite amphibian told radio station ENERGY Berlin, "With all due respect to *Muppets From Space*, you don't want that to be the last movie you ever do."

COLUMBIA PICTURES/COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION/ALAMY



Henry and Chandler with their superiors in the Corps.

EVERETT COLLECTION INC/ALAMY

To Die And Live In LA

18 JULY 1999 "Beneath the façade of everyday life a battle is being waged," Chandler Smythe (Clayton Rohner) is told in "Orange Volvo", the opening episode of metaphysical cop show *G vs E* (subsequently rebranded *Good vs Evil*). "Light versus dark, us and them."

Recently murdered, Smythe is offered a deal to escape purgatory. He joins the Corps, a taskforce dedicated to busting demons and saving people who have traded their souls for success. Naturally, it was set in Hollywood.

Created by brothers Josh and Jonas Pate, this quirky USA Network offering chased the glib, retro-cool spirit of Tarantino. There was more than a pinch of *Pulp Fiction* in Smythe's banter with partner Henry McNeil (Richard Brooks), a self-declared "soul man" rocking an afro and leather jacket. Slain in 1979, Henry's perfectly placed for the '70s revival powering pre-millennium pop-culture.

"Hip violence with a sense of humour" declared the *New York Post* rap sheet.



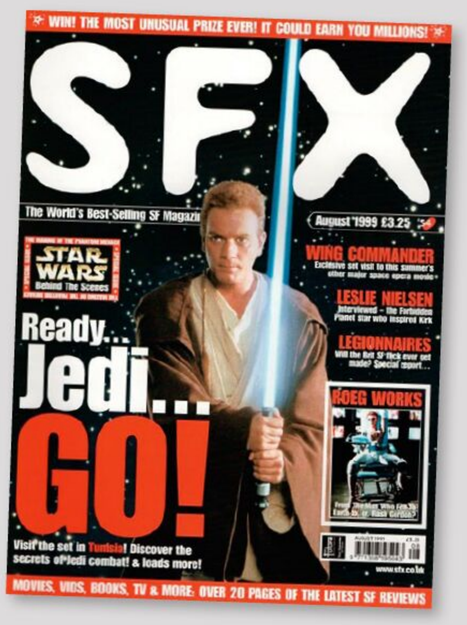
Ricky Martin tops the global charts.

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IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Tony Blair
- **US President:** Bill Clinton
- **In the charts:** Ricky Martin turns the charts upside, inside out as he takes "Livin' La Vida Loca" to top spot.
- **In the news:** The Scottish Parliament is officially opened by Queen Elizabeth II; in Rome, Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj runs the fastest mile ever recorded; John F Kennedy Jr dies in a plane crash; troubled music festival Woodstock '99 is held in Rome, New York; India recaptures the Kargil district of Kashmir, ending a two-month conflict with Pakistan.

ON THE SHELF



SFX readers feel the Force with issue 54, as it goes behind the scenes of *The Phantom Menace*. Also inside: *Wing Commander* and Leslie Nielsen!

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

SLASHER MOVIES

Do you like scary movies? Then you should score highly. If not... well, let's just say we have a loved one gaffer-taped to a chair

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
In which Illinois small town is *Halloween* set?

QUESTION 2
Which *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* star appeared in *I Know What You Did Last Summer*?

QUESTION 3
Which *Star Trek* star appeared in the Canadian slasher movie *Visiting Hours*?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this slasher film from the killer's mask.


QUESTION 4

QUESTION 5
Which director was behind the proto-slashers *Blood And Black Lace* and *A Bay Of Blood*?

QUESTION 6
At the start of the original version of *Scream*, what foodstuff is Casey Becker (Drew Barrymore's character) making?

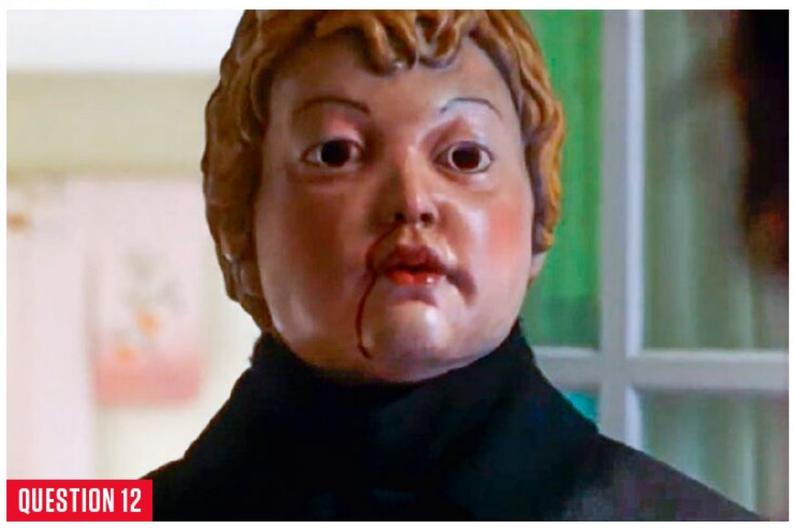
QUESTION 7
Which slasher franchise had sequels subtitled *Dead End*, *Left For Dead*, *Bloody Beginnings*, *Bloodlines* and *Last Resort*?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify this slasher film from the killer's mask.


QUESTION 8

QUESTION 9
In *Sleepaway Camp*, what is the shock twist at the end regarding the identity of the killer?

QUESTION 10
In *Child's Play*, what's the name of the serial killer whose soul is transferred to a Good Guy doll using voodoo magic?


QUESTION 12

QUESTION 11
What is the unique gimmick of 2024 slasher *In A Violent Nature*?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify this slasher film from the killer's mask.

QUESTION 13
Which 1980 slasher film had the poster tagline: "If you're not back by midnight... you won't be coming home!"

QUESTION 14
Under what alternative title was the Catholic-themed slasher *Alice, Sweet Alice* released in the UK?

QUESTION 15
In *Friday The 13th* (1980), how is Kevin Bacon's character killed?


QUESTION 16

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this slasher film from the killer's mask.

QUESTION 17
In the 1999 slasher *Cherry Falls*, what sort of victims does the killer exclusively prey upon?

QUESTION 18
In 1981's *The Burning*, what weapon does the horribly burned caretaker Cropsy use?

QUESTION 19
Which slasher film centres on a serial killer called the Blissfield Butcher?

QUESTION 20
What familial connection links *Psycho* and *Halloween*?

Answers
1 Haddonfield 2 Sarah Michelle Gellar 3 William Shatner 4 *Terror Train* 5 Mario Bava 6 Popcorn 7 *Wrong Turn* 8 *Stage Fright* 9 "She" is actually a boy 10 Charles Lee Ray 11 It's mostly seen from the killer's POV 12 *Valentine* 13 *Prom Night* 14 *Communion* 15 An arrow through his neck 16 *Happy Death Day* 17 Virgins 18 A pair of garden shears 19 *Freaky* 20 Jamie Lee Curtis is the daughter of Janet Leigh

How did you do?

Rank yourself by kill count

0-5
Buffy St John

6-10
Pamela Voorhees

11-15
The Fisherman

16-19
Combined Ghostfaces

20
Jason Voorhees

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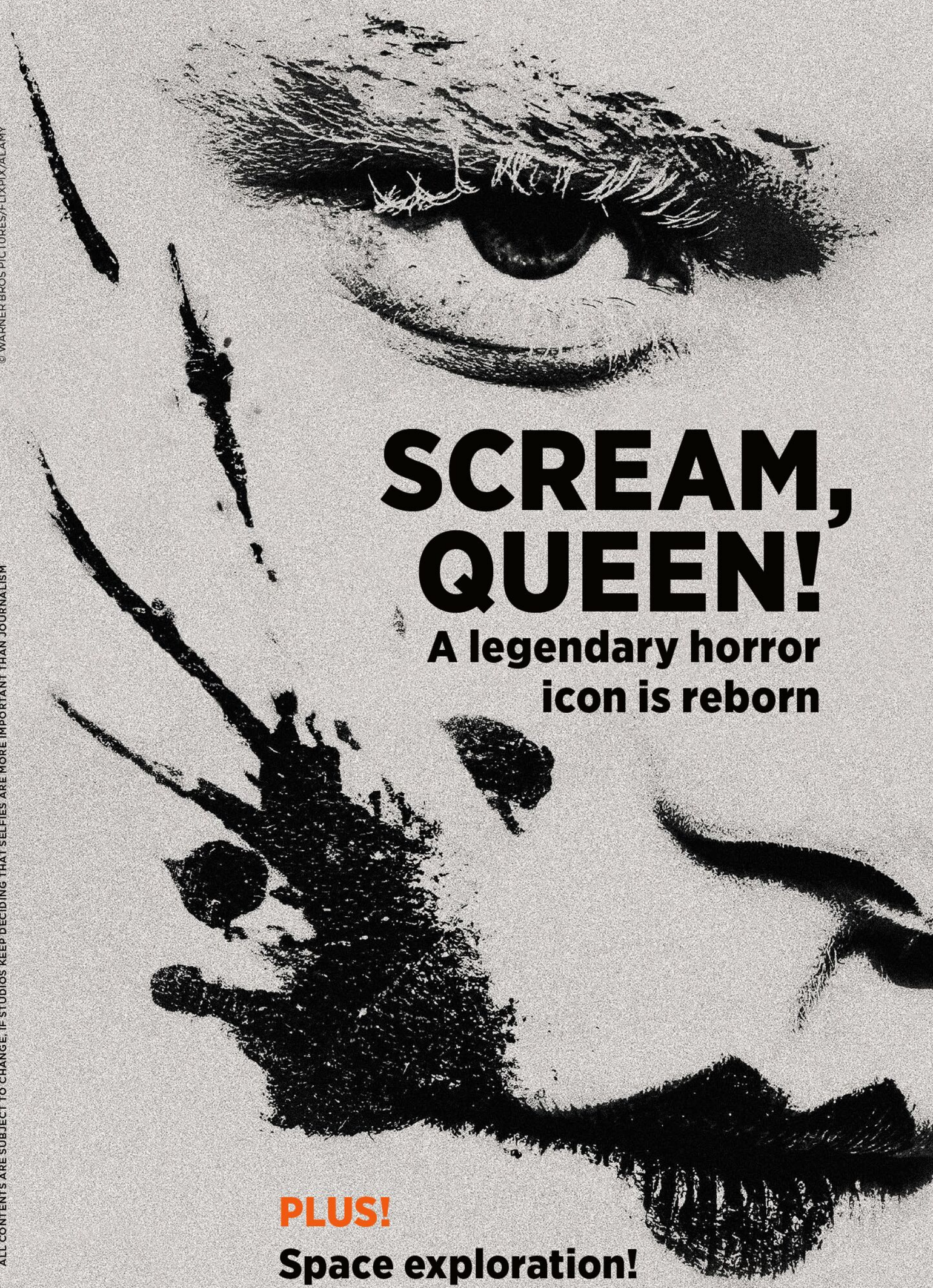
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Nowhere Man

Jayne Nelson, Freelance writer



Sometime in the early '80s, as a hormonal young teenager, I discovered a show named *Legmen* about two guys who chased felons for a Californian bail bond agency. It wasn't great, but I was entranced by one of its leads: a handsome, energetic fellow named Bruce Greenwood.

Hormones fully engaged, I followed his career for years (he had a good run on *St Elsewhere*), but it wasn't until 1995 that I saw him given the honour of toplining his own show, *Nowhere Man*.

By that point, my hormones had wandered off, so I could watch the series objectively. And what a surprise it was: a *The Fugitive*-style thriller with occasionally wacky, *The Prisoner*-esque elements; down-to-earth, but also riffing on everything from *The Twilight Zone* to *The A-Team*. Greenwood – sporting a superb floppy hairdo – played Thomas Veil, a photographer whose life is turned upside down after snapping a controversial picture. While eating a meal in a restaurant with his wife, he pops to the loo. Upon his return, she says she has no idea who he is. His friends don't know him either. His bank cards no longer work. Even his dog hates him now!

Veil soon realises that he's in danger – someone wants the negatives of his incriminating photo, and they're powerful enough to erase his life to get them. And so he criss-crosses the country in a relentless cat-and-mouse game with shadowy figures who kidnap him (so frequently it borders on ridiculous), mess with his mind (literally, when hooking him up to brainwashing tech) and generally try to drive him bonkers. Madness piles on madness; at one point, he even discovers that his life is a TV show. Throughout, Greenwood's hair remains superb.

The central mystery is engaging, its star has buckets of charisma, and the show is propelled by *The X-Files* legend Mark Snow's pounding, ominous score. Yet ironically, the composer's other gig was probably *Nowhere Man*'s downfall. Over on Fox, Mulder and Scully were also investigating a shadowy cabal, but they were armed with a bigger budget, a bigger audience and bigger balls. Greenwood's little series on UPN did its best, but its premise was stretched thinly over too many episodes. It was cancelled after one season.

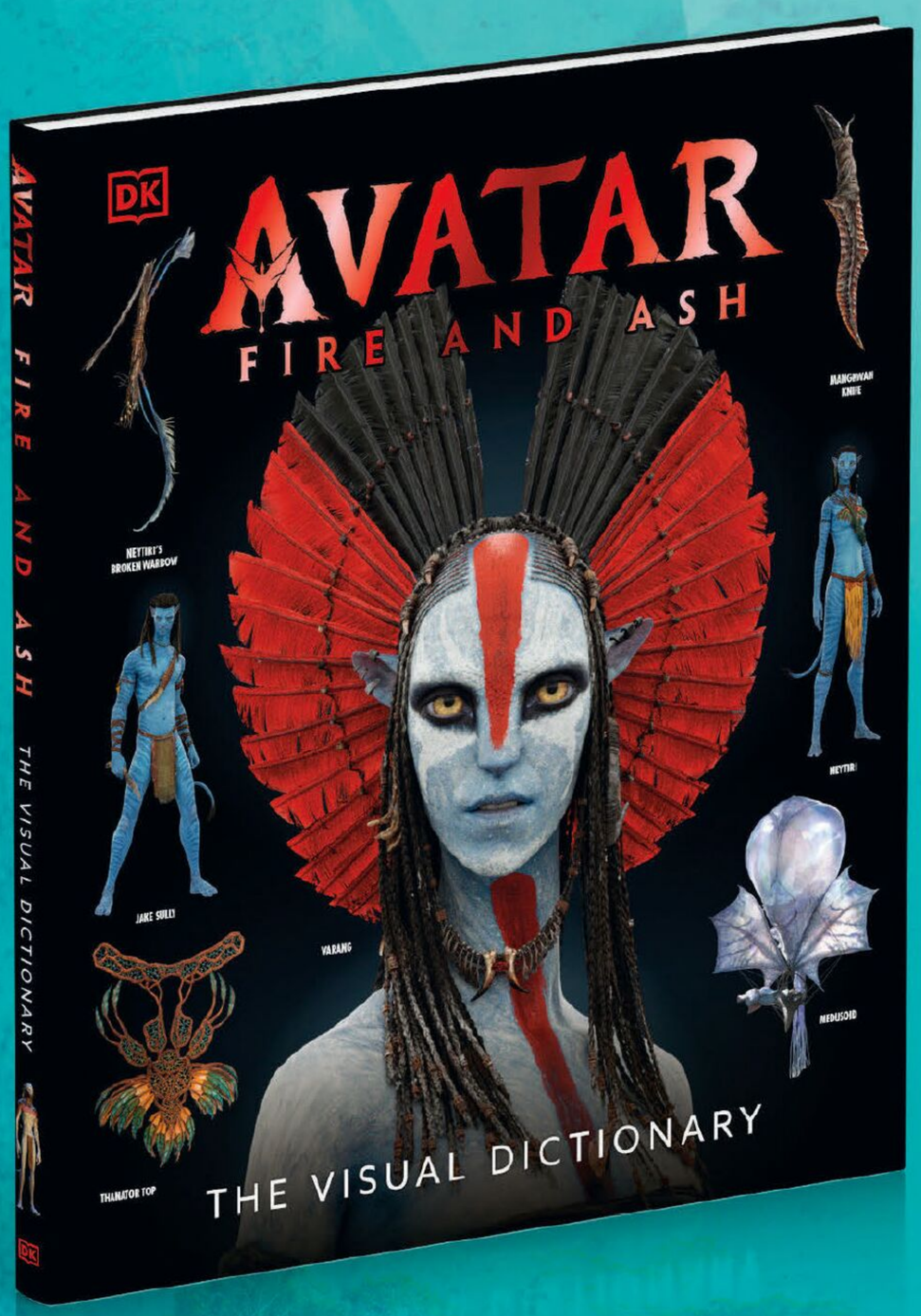
Greenwood went on to bigger things – helming a starship as *Star Trek*'s Captain Christopher Pike, for one. And 30 years on, at 69, his hair remains superb.

Forty years later, Jayne still remembers every word of the Legmen theme song.

Fact Attack!

- *Nowhere Man* was created by Lawrence Hertzog, who acknowledged that *The Prisoner* was a huge influence on the show.
- In one episode, Veil is assigned the number six. In another, he's forcibly transported to a strange village. Sound familiar?
- Hertzog said that writing the show involved coming into the writers' room every day and starting with "the most preposterous thing".
- Bruce Greenwood has voiced another Bruce – Bruce Wayne – three times, including in *Batman: Under The Red Hood*.
- There's no region two DVD box set, but all the episodes of *Nowhere Man* can be found on YouTube, uploaded by user Santa Holbrook.

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