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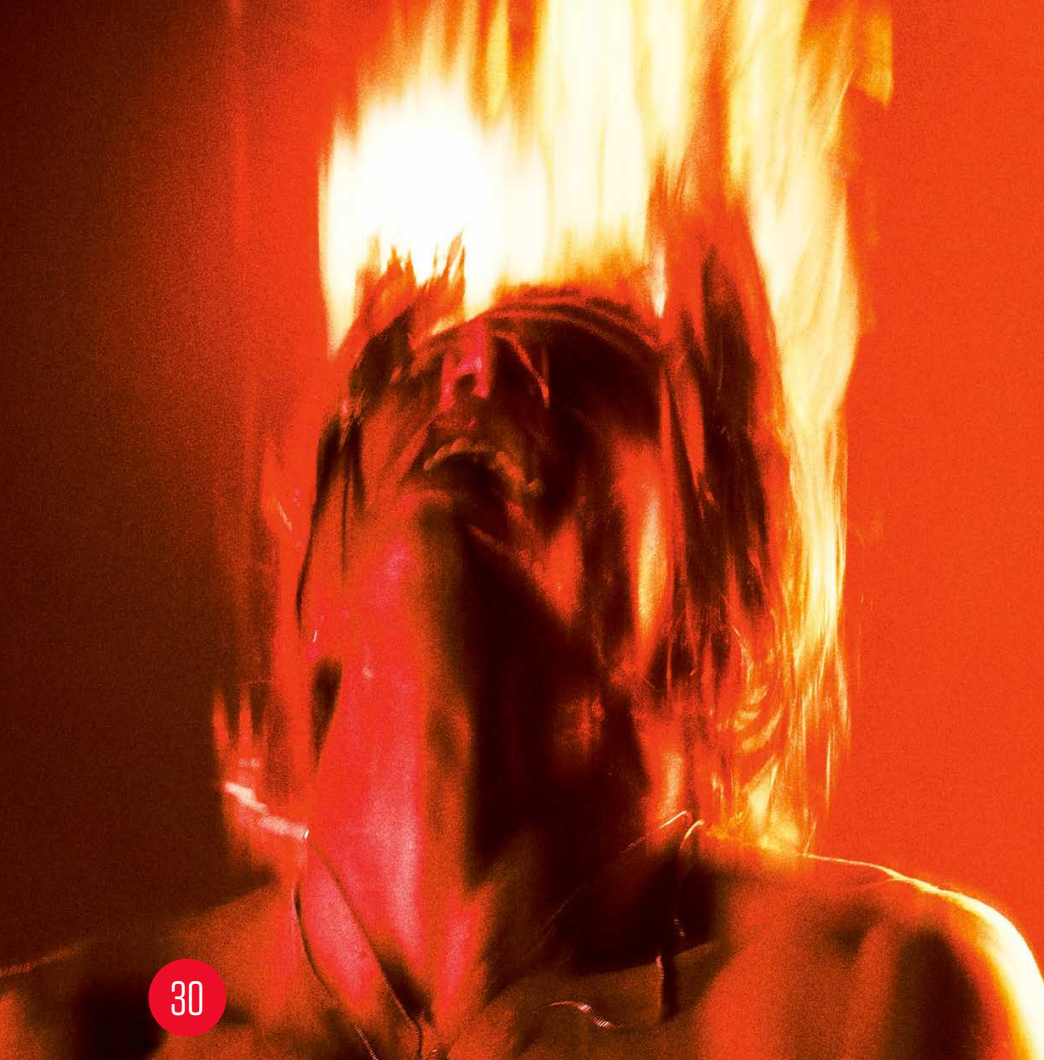
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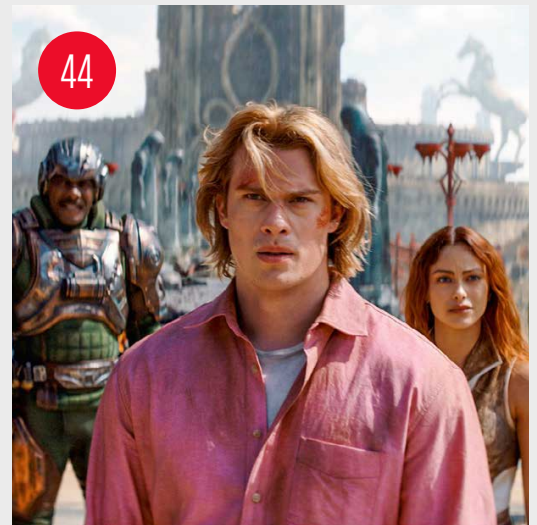


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# RESIDENT EVIL requiem

# ESCAPE

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THE POWER TO PLAY ANYWHERE



## Captain's Log



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Seeing the Anne Rice Universe come to life as it was originally intended via AMC's three linked series has been thrilling for this long-time fan. But it's naturally the *Interview With The Vampire* books that have had my black heart the longest, so I'm delighted that we've *finally* been able to make a cover work – and just in time for Pride month! That accidental covering of the letter F feels apt.

At the risk of sounding like a broken (Lestat) record, this is another packed issue – not only do we have our rock anti-god cover star, but some guy called Spielberg's back making another sci-fi movie. That'll never catch on, right?

And then I'm dangerously close to becoming one of those "fans" you see online, who won't accept a new version of something they love – simply because *Masters Of The Universe* (1987) is one of my all-time favourite movies. (That, and because they wouldn't allow us to see filming just down the road, but I'm not bitter... much) But the new live-action *He-Man* movie looks like it's going to push *all* the right buttons. And Karg's back! My nerd love always wins out... and love always wins!

I'm celebrating seven years with *SFX* and loving every minute of it, and we've got lots of plans for exciting things coming up – so please do me a favour and follow us across our social channels and sign up for our free newsletter. Share the *SFX* love!

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## Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind



**DARREN SCOTT** EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Had such a great time at Universal Fan Fest Nights in Hollywood. Getting to be in a real-life episode of *Scooby-Doo* on the studio backlot where they filmed the Universal Monster movies was mind-blowing.

### RANTS

→ I've got money to spend in here – why isn't the Spookyworld documentary film *Spooktacular!* available to buy on disc? Or even to stream in the UK?



**IAN BERRIMAN** DEPUTY EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Something I hadn't considered when I went to Paris for the weekend were the exciting opportunities for *Ulysses 31* merchandise. Drooled over a boxed toy of the Odyssey at the Marché Dauphine, and picked up a 7" of the theme tune for €5.

→ Of course, like any self-respecting *Doctor Who* fan, I also got a photograph of myself in front of the doors to Count Scarlioni's chateau, and had a glass of wine at Le Petit Pont – the cafe Tom Baker and Lalla Ward visited in 1979.

→ Enjoying listening to Mark Jenkin's Brian Eno-esque score for *Rose Of Nevada* ([bit.ly/rosescore](http://bit.ly/rosescore)) – out on vinyl on 26 June.



**NICK SETCHFIELD** EDITOR AT LARGE

### RAVES

→ A real treat to see *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* back on the big screen – the first time for me since the original UK release in 1978! It's a film I know inside out, but it felt new again.

→ Enjoyed Francis O'Dowd's perceptive look at "Logopolis" in *Extreme Science*, book four of his *The Deaths Of Doctor Who* series.



**TARA BENNETT** US EDITOR

### RAVES

→ Definitely seek out *The Terror* season three. Based on Victor LaValle's book *The Devil In Silver*, the series is a claustrophobic and unsettling look at institutional health. Dan Stevens and the whole cast are great.

→ Already listening to the earworm *The Vampire Lestat* playlist on repeat.

### RANTS

→ Disney axing the Marvel Studios Vis Dev team is a terrible decision. Artists were invaluable in establishing the look and now they aren't?

THE  
FUTURE  
FIRST!

# Red Alert

JUNE  
2026

→ NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// TATTOOS!



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## Screen Time

Toy Story 5 gets an upgrade in the playroom

### Highlights



#### 18 YOU ARE NOT ALONE

→ A new book looks at the gay connections to Doctor Who. How very dare Who!



#### 19 WICCAN & HULKLING

→ Ultron's crashing Pride! It's always the metallic madmen with an axe to Grindr.



#### 21 STAR TREK

→ Starfleet Academy returns in a new Pride story, sure to illicit no strange responses online whatsoever.

Kane Parsons's web series is leaping to the big screen.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

## Make Room

The viral **Backrooms** series expands into a full-length feature WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

➔ "THERE HAVE BEEN A NUMBER of very absurd, insane variables at play, things that feel almost beyond human comprehension," says Kane Parsons, reflecting on the journey that has taken his viral phenomenon *Backrooms* to the big screen. "It was a lot of 'right place, right time' stuff that happened to line up algorithmically; the right people seeing it and corresponding."

Parsons was just 16 when he created the original nine-minute short, inspired by a creepypasta posted anonymously on 4chan in 2019. Made primarily using the 3D graphics software Blender, it unfolds as a first-person exploration of an endless maze of mono-yellow rooms, lit by buzzing fluorescent lights and inhabited by unsettling, barely glimpsed entities. The video has since amassed more than 76 million views on his YouTube channel, Kane Pixels, and

led to nearly two dozen equally eerie follow-ups.

For Parsons, now 20, a move to the big screen was always the "dream scenario", though he says it took time to settle on an approach that would "preserve so much of what works tonally" about the series. "For where I wanted to go, I have a lot of loyalties to my online fanbase and the people who have already invested in the story," he explains. "So it was non-negotiable that whatever happened had to be in strict continuity with that."

Structurally, *Backrooms* moves away from the shorts' jumbled timelines. "It's a conventional story," he says. "It follows a very specific point in time, and it follows it linearly." The film begins with a strange doorway opening in the basement wall of a furniture store. Its owner, Clark (Chiwetel Ejiofor), and his therapist, Mary (Renate Reinsve), pass through it into what the official synopsis calls a "terrifying, unexplained realm".

For Parsons, who is otherwise keeping story details close to his chest, the biggest change is

that the audience now has a character to follow. "It's not someone behind the camera; you're able to invest in an actual human, let that person experience things, and have the audience feel it by proxy," he says.

The film still carries traces of its origins. "It blends the found footage medium that I engage with most prominently on YouTube with more traditionally cinematic scenes," he explains. "The majority of the film is not found footage, but there is a substantial mix."





Renate Reinsve is an initially sceptical therapist.



The less you read up on this beforehand, the better.



Chiwetel Ejiofor is Clark, who finds the strange space.

Lukita Maxwell and Finn Bennett ready to get lost.



Walk through that "door" to enter the Backrooms.

The production is backed by 11 producers, who Parsons credits with helping to keep it true to what audiences expect from the shorts. Among them are two of modern horror's most prominent filmmakers: Osgood Perkins (*Longlegs*) and James Wan (*The Conjuring*). Perkins, in particular, has become a close collaborator. "He really gets what works for people," Parsons says. "His office is right next to mine, so I see him every day, we're kind of buddies now. I pick his brain all the time. He offers little pieces of advice, all within the context of what I've been working on." Wan, meanwhile, "provided some great, very specific, time-coded editorial notes on how to derive specific visceral reactions from people. He's got a lot of it down to a science."

Asked whether the film will offer any clear answers about the nature of the Backrooms, Parsons points back to their origins. "It comes down to who is authorised to give answers," he says, adding that he's grateful audiences have embraced his take on the idea. "I have immense

## “I have immense faith in audience members to piece things together”

faith in audience members to piece things together contextually," he continues. "I don't personally believe in true answers. You can describe just about anything in a way that feels like one – and people need that, they appreciate that, they look for it, and they obsess over it."

"And, generally speaking, in the Backrooms there's always been more of a focus on that obsession than on the answers themselves. Not to say there aren't any. Every question someone could ask has an answer I could give, but it's almost as if the Backrooms preys on that desire more than it actually has something to offer if you follow the thread to its conclusion."

For Parsons, the *Backrooms* experience – his directorial debut – has been a steep learning curve. "What I've learned is that it's a miracle anything happens," he laughs. "Making a

movie, there are so many moving parts. I didn't expect how much effort it would take to coordinate everything. It has ballooned into something I appreciate a lot more now."

Parsons is already thinking about the series' future. "I guess it feels weird and out of touch calling it the IP," he says, "but I find myself saying it that way more and more these days." He's keen to expand the world as a limited series; a format he feels could allow for a "more thoughtful", layered kind of horror. Whether that comes next or not, he already knows where it's heading.

"What happens exists in writing somewhere," he says. "I'm very obsessive, and I want to make sure the audience has faith that there's an underlying plan that doesn't contradict itself. I try to take a lot of care to plan for the future and, right now, everything is laid out in a way that this is very much heading towards more in this world." ●

*Backrooms* is in cinemas from 29 May.

► **SCI-FACT!** The Backrooms creepypasta originated from a photo of a HobbyTown store under renovation.

The boys (and girls) are back in town. Er, on ship.



PRODUCER EXCLUSIVE

## Whisper Campaign

It's the beginning of the end for **The Legend Of Vox Machina**

WORDS: TARA BENNETT

IT'S BEEN TWO YEARS since we last saw the Vox Machina crew of seven kicking ass. At the end of season three of Prime Video's *The Legend Of Vox Machina*, the adult animated adaptation of the *D&D* web series *Critical Role*, our heroes had closed their epic, dragon-filled Chroma Conclave arc.

Season four picks up one year later, and our dysfunctional crew of half-elves, gnomes, a barbarian

and a human are scattered about Exandria. Series executive producers Sam Riegel (voice of Scanlan Shorthalt) and Travis Willingham (Grog Strongjaw) – who are also co-creators of the *Critical Role D&D* campaign that the series adapts – tell Red Alert that both old fans and new should be prepared for a season full of unexpected twists.

“We wanted this season to immediately feel different from

the other seasons, and a way to do that is by starting the characters not together,” Riegel says of the dispersed adventurers. “They’ve all had a year off to go about their own personal journeys and enjoy their romantic entanglements and figure out what is missing from their life – or at least, what they still need. How and when they get back together is

just a new dynamic for the group. This is something that happened in the campaign as well. Vox Machina took a year off, and it's just a really cool thing to be able to do; to let time pass and see how people grow and change.”

Part of that season four change includes an expanding stable of characters. “There are some new characters in season four that we hope our fans will be delighted to see,” Willingham teases. “Some good, some bad, some in every shade of the rainbow in-between.”

The Vox crew will also expand by one, with the addition of human artificer Taryon Darrington (voiced by Wayne Brady). “He’s a character that I had played in





“It’s just all too much to bear.” “Tell me about it.”

knew that we had these two seasons to complete the journey and tell the tale,” Riegel says of Prime Video. “What a rare gift it is to be able to tell a story, start to finish, on any television show.”

If *The Whispered One* sounds familiar, Willingham says it should because they’ve been laying clues about this baddie going back to the start. “It’s been a name that lingered back there and has maybe fallen just enough into the background for our heroes to have forgotten about it.

“But we’re going to start to tease up the little influences and the little machinations that have been happening from the shadows, that are starting to creep into the fray.

We’ll see how they’re going to intersect with each one of our heroes, and what they’re each trying to find. Season four will tee that up beautifully.”

Riegel says there will also be more to the cultists introduced in the third season finale, and why they’re surrounding *The Whispered One*. “In the animated series we get to zoom in on the cultists a bit more,” he explains. “What they’re doing and how they’re actively trying to restore their god to the material plane is super-cool to explore. We introduce some new members of the cult that we didn’t get to meet in the campaign, which is also a great opportunity for us to flex more different villains with different powers and monsters.”

With a fresh Big Bad, bigger stakes than ever before and an

“In the series we get to zoom in on the cultists a bit more”

urgency to get the beloved crew reunited and ready for battle, Riegel says this season of *The Legend Of Vox Machina* feels unique. “Overall, there’s a darker tone and the inevitable march towards the end sort of casts a pall over the whole season,” he says excitedly. “Even with the lighter-hearted episodes, there’s always a sense that something bad is coming. So that sense of stakes and seriousness is a really cool flavour to be building towards.”

*The Legend Of Vox Machina* is on Prime Video from 3 June.

the campaigns that I didn’t want to play the character in the animated series,” Riegel explains. “Number one, it would sound like me and number two, this was a rare opportunity to bring in someone else to be a main character in the show. That’s such a great opportunity to bring in some new blood. We both thought that Wayne was perfect for the gig, and he was happy to do it.”

They’ll need all the help they can get, because across the span of season four and season five, which will close the series, the Vox Machina crew will be facing arguably their greatest foe, *The Whispered One*.

“We had asked for five seasons, and they gave them to us, so we



Expect a lovely, heartwarming reunion. Possibly.



As usual, things tend to get a bit chaotic.

**SCI-FACT!** Sam Riegel, Travis Willingham and Wayne Brady first met and worked together on the animated show *Sofia The First*.

► **SCI-FACT!** Both Ryan North and Chip Zdarsky hail from Canada, giving them a unique perspective on characters like Captain America.



WRITER EXCLUSIVE



Wolverine, Spidey and Red Hulk in fighting mode.

# Hero Complex

**Doctor Doom** goes on a Quest this summer, while the Avengers face Armageddon **WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL**

➔ AFTER WRITING AND coordinating 2025's near year-long crossover *One World Under Doom*, Ryan North is now enjoying the relative creative freedom that comes with scripting evergreen maxi-series *Doomquest*, a standalone 10-partner that serves as a perfect introduction to Marvel's most infamous adversary ahead of December's release of *Avengers: Doomsday*.

"*Doomquest* really lets us dive into Doom's character and who this guy really is while also

putting him in situations he's never been in or likely even considered before – so he has to improvise," says North. "I'm having tons of fun writing it as he's not just a villain who sees himself as a hero; he's the world's greatest villain who sees himself as the world's greatest hero, and everything with him is so grand, heightened and operatic."

Doom's rivalry with Fantastic Four leader and fellow scientific genius Reed Richards, dating back to their university days, is central to the storyline. "I see it as similar to Lex

Luthor and Superman's relationship," explains North. "Doom knows in his bones that he would be the most famous, accomplished and celebrated person on the planet if Reed Richards didn't exist – and that's not easy to live with. We'll also see Doom's relationship with Reed and Sue Storm's daughter Valeria – or with a Valeria, anyway..."

While North says "I don't want to spoil too much, but he's Doctor Doom so he's obviously going to go to some pretty spectacular spaces", we do know Doom's quest sends him on a journey through time and space as he attempts to rewrite history in his own name. "We have him on the Titanic and in 1775, interacting with a certain General and Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army of the United Colonies, and in time periods that are even more fun."

The writer praises artist Francesco Mobili's ability to imbue his pages with both detail and life. "He makes Doom – a man whose entire face is covered with a mask – still able to emote so clearly despite it. I can't wait for you to see



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

## Ages Of X

The new **X-Men '97** tie-in miniseries spans the whole of season two WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



**AFTER THEIR FIRST X-MEN '97** miniseries bridged the gap between the original *X-Men: The Animated Series*, which first screened on Fox Kids between 1992 and 1997, and Marvel Studio Animation's 2024 series, Steve Foxe and Salva Espin are returning for another five-parter, tying in with the upcoming second season.

"While the last series was a self-contained prequel, this one really loops in and out of the show's story much more," explains Foxe, who watched all of season two in advance. "We could really embrace that more adventurous spirit, as they gave us all the resources and backstory to nail our story and empowered this miniseries to feel like a key part of the saga."

Working with what Foxe describes as "a very challenging status quo", season one's cliffhanger saw most of the X-Men lost in the timestream. "We're in close and constant communication with the '97 team, who care a lot about matching this series with the show's continuity and vibe," he continues. "It's been an intensive process to get right, but very fulfilling to feel like we're meaningfully expanding on and complementing the story viewers will get on screen. Marvel Animation and the *X-Men '97* team have been generous with letting us in on the beats they couldn't cover and giving us room to explore the story... if we've done our job right you'll be able to neatly match this comic to the episodes."

The narrative is divided between the future, as Cyclops and Phoenix encounter Mother Askani and young Nathan Summers (aka Cable) in 3960 AD and the past as Nightcrawler, Beast, Professor Xavier and Magneto cross paths with Apocalypse's alter ego, En Sabah Nur, in ancient Egypt. Foxe confirms that the First Mutant's spectre looms large over the storyline.

"You'll see the web of characters he's affected - or even created - threaten what's left of the X-Men in a big way," he teases. "We had the opportunity to explore more about the antagonists from the show and introduce a few you don't really see on screen, so it's been a blast putting the mutants through the wringer here."

Meanwhile, the present day is just as grim for those mutants that have been left behind, which includes Forge, Sunspot, Bishop and Jubilee. "I naturally gravitate towards Jubilee as we were both born in the same year, 1989, as it were, and she was the entry character to the original cartoon," says Foxe. "Any fan will tell you that any time the X-Men disappear, that void doesn't take long to get filled by other mutants."

Describing him as "a dream collaborator", Foxe praises Espin. "He just gets this world," he says. "He brings a perfect animated touch to the action while keeping things impactful and dynamic." ●

*X-Men '97* is out on 3 June.



*Armageddon* sees Latveria become a battleground.

“Everything with Doctor Doom is so grand, heightened and operatic”

his Doom go up against time itself!”

One of Marvel's offerings for May's Comics Giveaway Day, *Doomquest* is previewed in *Armageddon/X-Men CGD 2026*, which also includes a peek at *Avengers: Armageddon* by writer Chip Zdarsky and artists Frank Alpizar and Delio Diaz. With Zdarsky noting that "a tactical Hulk who wants to spread democracy at any cost is a strong antagonist", it sees Red Hulk claiming Latveria for himself, precipitating tumultuous events that lead to a significant turning point for Marvel's premiere super-team.

"There's definitely more global political stuff here, as the last *Avengers* series was so cosmic, cool and big, but I wanted to use *Armageddon* as an opportunity to see what Earth's Mightiest Heroes means on Earth again," says Zdarsky, who also believes there are some real-life parallels. "The thing I love about Marvel is the 'world outside your window' part, so I'm drawn toward making these heroes feel grounded to our recognisable world." ●

*Armageddon/X-Men CGD 2026* is out now. *Doomquest* is out on 27 May. *Avengers: Armageddon* is out on 3 June.



This will be a handy primer ahead of season two.

► **SCI-FACT!** *X-Men: The Animated Series* was commissioned by Fox Kids' Margaret Loesch, who worked with Stan Lee in Hollywood.

Javier Bardem as heavily tattooed villain Max Cady.



CAST INTERVIEW

# Blood, Sweat And (Cape) Fear

**Cape Fear** is back with a big, bold and brutal vengeance

WORDS: ADAM TANSWELL

**➔** FILM FANS ARE IN FOR A TREAT when Apple TV's blood-splashed retelling of *Cape Fear* launches as a limited series on the streamer in June. Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese (who produced and directed the 1991 movie) are two of the powerhouse producers behind the new 10-episode show, which sees Javier Bardem tackle the role of a convicted killer seeking revenge. With this in mind, the creative team promises lashes of horror and suspense.

"To me, the '91 version is a horror movie," explains showrunner, creator and executive producer Nick Antosca. "It's in the thriller section of the video store, but it's definitely a horror movie. It's about that fundamental terror of losing your kids and your family. There is some gnarly stuff in our show. I mean, it's horrible."

Amy Adams and Patrick Wilson play the happily married lawyers at the heart of the

drama, which is a killer thriller blended with a mix of psychotic and sinister surprises. "I think you're always afraid of what you can't see," says Amy Adams, speaking about the horror of the piece. "And this show has such a voyeuristic quality to it." If you've seen the tension-filled teaser trailer, you'll know how the terror, trepidation and trauma ratchets up the intensity.

Patrick Wilson – from the *Insidious* franchise – is no stranger to genre projects. "One of the reasons why I love horror is the massive umbrella you're under," the *Aquaman* actor admits. "I think it's bigger than any other genre. We get asked these questions a lot: What's the most horrible thing to happen to you? What makes you scared? As an actor, it's never ghosts or demons for me. Instead, it's about anything that happens to my family. Well, this whole show is all about that, so it's incredibly horrific."

"I think every good horror film is really just a family drama," he continues. "What better way to be able to explore a real family drama than with 10 episodes? You get to see the real horror and you get the time to work out the highs and lows of relationships – both as a family, as siblings and as spouses."

The arc of Apple TV's limited series also allows the audience to take a deep dive into the wider world created for the show, as well as build on the acute friction of the piece. "We can

Lily Collins's Natalie is tracked by Bardem's Cady.



ALL IMAGES © APPLE TV. (3) IMAGES COURTESY LANDMARK MEDIA/ALAMY

Amy Adams takes on the role of Anna Bowden.



Don't be fooled by Cady's cutesy heart sunglasses...

expand on the characters and each of their issues," Wilson adds. "When you're dealing with a thriller and psychological drama, it's all about the tension and release – but this tension is carried throughout each episode."

### BLAST FROM THE PAST

Robert Mitchum and Robert De Niro played the crazed *Cape Fear* antagonist Max Cady in the 1962 and 1991 big-screen versions of the story, but Javier Bardem's macabre and grisly portrayal of the character is chock-full of chills.

"He is absolutely terrifying," confirms Adams. "Javier has such a natural charisma and he brings all of that power, the baritone voice and the presence. He also brings a lot of vulnerability, too. There's so much devastation in his portrayal that I look forward to everyone getting to see. On top of all that bravado and danger is this deep vulnerability."

"All of us have a favourite Javier villainous moment, right?" adds Wilson. "Not that he

**“The show is about dread. To me, that reflects the atmosphere of being alive in 2026”**

doesn't play good guys, but come on... Between *No Country For Old Men* or *Bond* or whatever, we all have a favourite baddie. I'm excited for audiences to see another one of those roles for him."

"I rewatched the Martin Scorsese/Robert De Niro version while prepping, and there are scenes I had to fast forward because I just can't watch it," adds a rather squeamish Adams. "It's such wonderful material. Such great suspense. Such great character studies."

"When I read the pilot, it captured that same fever dream energy," she continues. "I love how it opened a world of discovery for the

characters to go so much deeper into their backstories and to bring more of the family members into Max's gaze. The story examines relationships and consequences. That's one of the things that I was really attracted to, examining the consequences of the things we keep secret."

The suspenseful story is based on John D MacDonal's gripping novel *The Executioners*, which was originally published in 1957 – but it's clear that the new series has been updated for the modern age.

"The show is about ambient dread," explains Antosca. "To me, that reflects the atmosphere of being alive in 2026, with its uncertainties and ambiguities and paranoia. That's the vibe."

"There is definitely acute fear in the show, too," Antosca adds. "It's intense." ●

*Cape Fear* is on Apple TV from 5 June.

**▶ SCI-FACT!** Martin Scorsese's original choice to play Sam Bowden (the lawyer stalked by Cady) in his 1991 version was Harrison Ford.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Tablet Troubles



Woody and Buzz face their tech overlord in **Toy Story 5** WORDS: TARA BENNETT

ANDREW STANTON'S career has had many chapters: animator, screenwriter, animation director, live action director (*John Carter*) and episodic TV director (*Stranger Things, For All Mankind*). Throughout it all, though, one thing has been one constant: his creative journey accompanying Pixar's *Toy Story* franchise.

"*Toy Story* came from our guts so long ago, it's hard to know where I stop and where it ends," Stanton tells Red Alert.

In 1990, Stanton was hired by Pixar and ended up co-writing *Toy Story*, the studio's first CG animated feature. In addition to being a huge hit with audiences, *Toy Story* ushered in the computer animation wave. In the subsequent 31 years, that first film was followed by three direct sequels and a spin-off. Together, they've earned three billion dollars at the box office. Stanton has developed the story of each instalment, but *Toy Story 5* is his first time directing one.

After the fourth film did well, Stanton says the "Pixar Braintrust" asked him to explore what a fifth film might look like. "I said, 'Let me write something, and if we agree on that, then maybe we can work together, and I'll direct something.' But I wanted to make sure it was something that I would want to live with for four years and that I could see."

Looking back to the story development for *Toy Story 3*, Stanton says a creative epiphany he had back then helped him crack how the classic playroom toys, especially Woody (Tom Hanks), Buzz (Tim Allen) and Jessie (Joan Cusack), might

feature in young Bonnie's (Scarlett Spears) life today.

"Let time pass," he says. "The thing that's unique about the *Toy Story* world – and the only other franchise that we've stepped into that naturally invites this is probably *Inside Out* – is the time passage and the growth of a child is part of the world. You have this beautiful gift that these toys are basically little vampires. They grow but they don't age."

What better way to exploit that than with the introduction of a new play disruptor, Bonnie's tablet the Lilypad (Greta Lee). "I knew Bonnie was special and creative, and I would buy her being one of the last outliers still playing with toys," Stanton explains. "But even then, I felt she couldn't hold out. What kid can with that seduction? So Lilypad was there from the beginning. It was just how to play her as a character that took a while, and how to make the relationship work with the toys coming into the room.

"Everybody assumes it's adversarial, but the big epiphany for us was there's no contest," he continues. "The tan, tall, new student from California just came to the East Coast school, and they just win. That became much more interesting to play into than a battle."

From there, Stanton built out the *Toy Story 5* script with co-writer/co-director Kenna Harris (*Elemental*). "I'd like to think that we've tried to capture the truth and nuance and complexity of growing up, and of navigating childhood and jealousy and emotions," he says of the film's themes. "I'm ageing myself, but when my kids were

Woody returns to help solve the problems tech causes.

Jessie (Joan Cusack) has become leader of the toys.

The Lilypad has a firm grip on young Bonnie's attention.

Buzz realises reinforcements will be needed this time.





Tom Hanks and Tim Allen provide voices once more.

“Toys are basically little vampires. They grow but don’t age”

going into middle school and into high school, they had a desktop computer and that already felt like, ‘What are we doing? Are we giving our kids keys to the Ferrari too soon?’ That argument has not changed.”

As for the classic toys, Woody left the gang in 4 to help reconnect abandoned toys with their owners, so Stanton looked at his own situation for inspiration. “Woody has always been a little bit of a mirror of what’s going on with me,” he admits. “Not that I tried to do that but he’s the guy that I learned to write for, and I was living the same thing as him.”

“I was gone for almost eight years from a regular, full-time job at Pixar when I wasn’t helming a movie,” he explains. “Then I was asked back, but it’s just not the same. It’s somebody else’s room,

and it’s somebody else’s world-running. Even though I’m not trying to take over, those muscles are very instinctual. Even at your best, you feel a little out of place.” All those feelings Stanton felt now live at the heart of Woody’s return to Bonnie.

For Buzz, it’s all about his relationship status. “He has always been smitten with Jessie, and he just wants to cement that,” Stanton says. “He’ll be her deputy until the end of time. Playing with that was very strong for the Jessie storyline. It’s a bit of a soap opera, like ‘Where are they now?’ There’s a big, wide, universal knowledge of everybody’s past in this film, and you don’t get that in other films, so we just leaned into it.”

*Toy Story 5 is in cinemas from 19 June.*



Is there a place for toys in an age of technology?

**SCI-FACT!** You can already buy your own officially licensed Lilypad tablet, made by VTech. Expect to pay around £25.

► **SCI-FACT!** The book takes its title from a cryptic line delivered by the Face of Boe to David Tennant's Doctor in the episode "Gridlock".



Producer John Nathan-Turner pictured in 1984.



Waris Hussein directed the very first *Who* story.



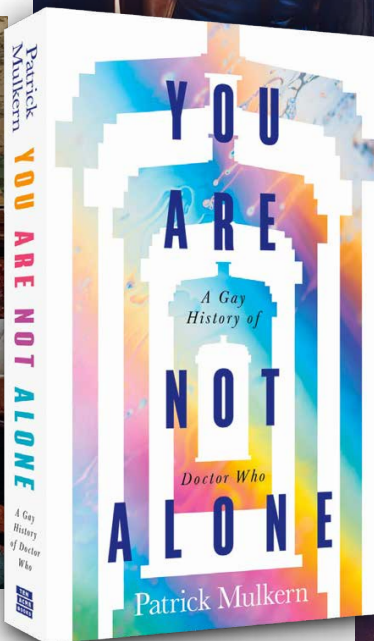
Ncuti Gatwa and Millie Gibson (Ruby): sassy.



Captain Jack (John Barrowman): not shy.



Sound effects ace Brian Hodgson with Katy Manning.



**WRITER EXCLUSIVE**

## Out Of The TARDIS

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

*Doctor Who's* queer appeal is explored in **You Are Not Alone**

FOR ONE REASON OR another, *Doctor Who* has long held a particular appeal for gay viewers. In *You Are Not Alone*, writer Patrick Mulhern examines the draw while also charting a "gay history" of the programme.

"I'm using *Doctor Who* as a framework, and around that you can show how times have changed, how attitudes have developed," Mulhern tells Red Alert.

Contributors reflecting on the period around the programme's

1963 debut – when homosexuality was still illegal – include Waris Hussein, the series' first director, and Brian Hodgson, who, as part of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop, created sound effects including the TARDIS materialisation.

"They're in their late eighties now and they've lived through so many different periods," Mulhern says. "They've got interesting stories to tell, and often they're not *Doctor Who*-specific. With Waris, it's the difficulties that he faced at

different times, being an Asian man and a gay man in the '60s and '70s – the expectations that there were – and how he's got to a very happy place now."

Through further conversations – including with Katy Manning (Jo Grant), Anneke Wills (Polly), Matthew Waterhouse (Adric) and director John Gorrie ("The Keys Of Marinus") – Mulhern profiles a number of gay and lesbian actors connected to the series, including Max Adrian ("The Myth Makers"), Beatrix Lehmann ("The Stones Of

Blood") and Mary Morris ("Snakedance"), as well as production staff such as '80s producer John Nathan-Turner.

Among those featured in the book, Mulhern singles out John Breslin – who played UNIT's Captain Munro in "Spearhead From Space" – as a "personal hero" for his role as an early gay rights activist.

"In 1970, he gave an interview to one of the national papers about being gay," Mulhern says. "He appeared on *Late Night Lineup*



WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# Found Family

Wiccan and Hulkling's anniversary party is gatecrashed in **Raid Of Ultron** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL



Matthew Waterhouse as Adric (left), with chums.



Pearl Mackie played lesbian companion Bill Potts.

talking very openly about it, and how he resented the constant portrayal of gay people by stereotypes in drama and in comedies. There was a place for that, and it could be entertaining, but he was also saying there are thousands of people out there – doctors, firemen, whoever they might be – who aren't being represented. People don't know about them. And some people are leading secret lives. He was willing to speak up about this.”

Although *Doctor Who* was never explicit in its portrayal of gay themes during its first three decades, Mulhern points to writers and contributors to the book Stephen Wyatt (“Paradise Towers”) and Rona Munro (“Survival”), whose scripts “let some of their interests, some of their sensibilities filter in”.

“It’s under the surface,” he explains. “It’s very much subtextual. If you’re looking for it, then you might see it. You mightn’t see it at the time, but you might appreciate it in some way. Now of course, we’re mining all of this in-depth and it’s quite obvious that it was there, but it went unannotated at the time.”

As the book reaches *Doctor Who*'s modern era, Mulhern speaks to showrunners Russell T Davies, Steven Moffat and Chris Chibnall about how the series has finally fully embraced on-screen representation – from John Barrowman’s omnisexual Captain Jack to Ncuti Gatwa’s Doctor, whom Mulhern describes as having “a very queer aspect to his personality”.

“A lot of young gay people – or queer people of any age – can sometimes feel very alone, or that society is conspiring against them,” adds Mulhern, explaining that the book aims to reassure them otherwise. “There are a lot of people out there involved in this funny old programme that you really love who probably had similar experiences, and this is how they’ve coped. These are their experiences. I hope people can take comfort from that.”

*You Are Not Alone* is released by Ten Acre Books on 25 May.

**AFTER VENTURING DOWN THE Witches’ Road** in his recent miniseries, Wiccan and his husband Hulkling celebrate their wedding anniversary in Marvel’s 2026 Pride one-off *Raid Of Ultron*. With the megalomaniacal robot gatecrashing the party, the 48-pager is composed of a sequence of interlinked stories by leading LGBTQIA+ creators, exploring the peculiar history of the extended Maximoff clan.

“I’m a sucker for unconventional family dynamics,” says *Witches’ Road* writer Wyatt Kennedy, who scripts the Wiccan-starring framing sequence for artist Stephen Byrne. “I was almost intimidated when I saw the full line-up and how they’re connected, but it meant that there’s lots of room to have playful or interesting interactions among the cast.

“It’s also just funny to have this smattering of magic and technology all existing under one roof. While everyone loves the Maximoff/Vision family, it hasn’t really been addressed that technically Ultron is part of the family too. He’s like the problematic grandpa who isn’t usually invited to family reunions.”

One half of Canadian pop duo Tegan and Sara (who are twins), Tegan Quin – making her Marvel debut – and artist Luciano Vecchio focus on Wiccan and his brother Speed. “I gravitated towards them right away as they’re also twins, which felt like an easy entry point,” she says. “Sara and I banter a lot, so I thought it could be fun to bring some of our sibling dynamic and

humour to the action, and being a twin almost feels like having a magical ability anyway. I also loved the idea of writing for a gay character; it felt like something I could connect to naturally. Sara’s been building her family over the years, welcoming two kids with her wife, while I’m not having kids. So it was interesting to play with the idea of domesticity through the different choices Wiccan and Speed make in their lives.”

With writer Josh Trujillo acknowledging “the Maximoff/Vision family tree is an unconventional one, but whose isn’t?” he and artist Bradley Clayton explore “the real familial love” between synthezoids Vision and his teenage daughter Viv.

“We also throw in some deadly Ultron antics to boot and introduce a brand new villain to the Marvel Universe who is bound to get people talking,” he teases. “Viv is one of the most fascinating young heroes ever. They both speak to what makes us human, but more importantly the connections we share with one another.”

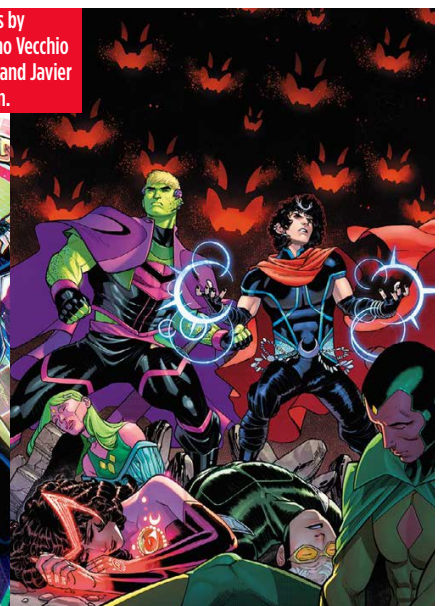
Countering the other stories’ heavy emphasis on Billy’s side of the family, writer Zoe Tunnell and artist Rachael Stott provide Hulkling’s perspective, as he encounters his alternate universe half-sister, Phyla-Vell.

“It’s been a true delight to write two queer siblings in loving marriages,” says Tunnell. “Talking about relationships, growth and how scary the future can be, all the while sword-fighting a murderous robot.”

*Wiccan & Hulkling: Raid Of Ultron* is out on 27 May.



Covers by Luciano Vecchio (left) and Javier Garrón.



**SCI-FACT!** Tegan and Sara previously wrote two autobiographical YA graphic novels, drawn by Tilly Walden.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

# To B Or Not To B

China Miéville returns to Keanu Reeves's BRZRKR with new comic

**Light Draws Breath**

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

**➔** AFTER CO-WRITING 2024 NOVEL *The Book Of Elsewhere* with BRZRKR creator Keanu Reeves, China Miéville is now returning to immortal warrior B, co-scripting BOOM! Studios' latest one-shot with his partner and *Cygnets* author Season Butler for artist Alessio Avallone.

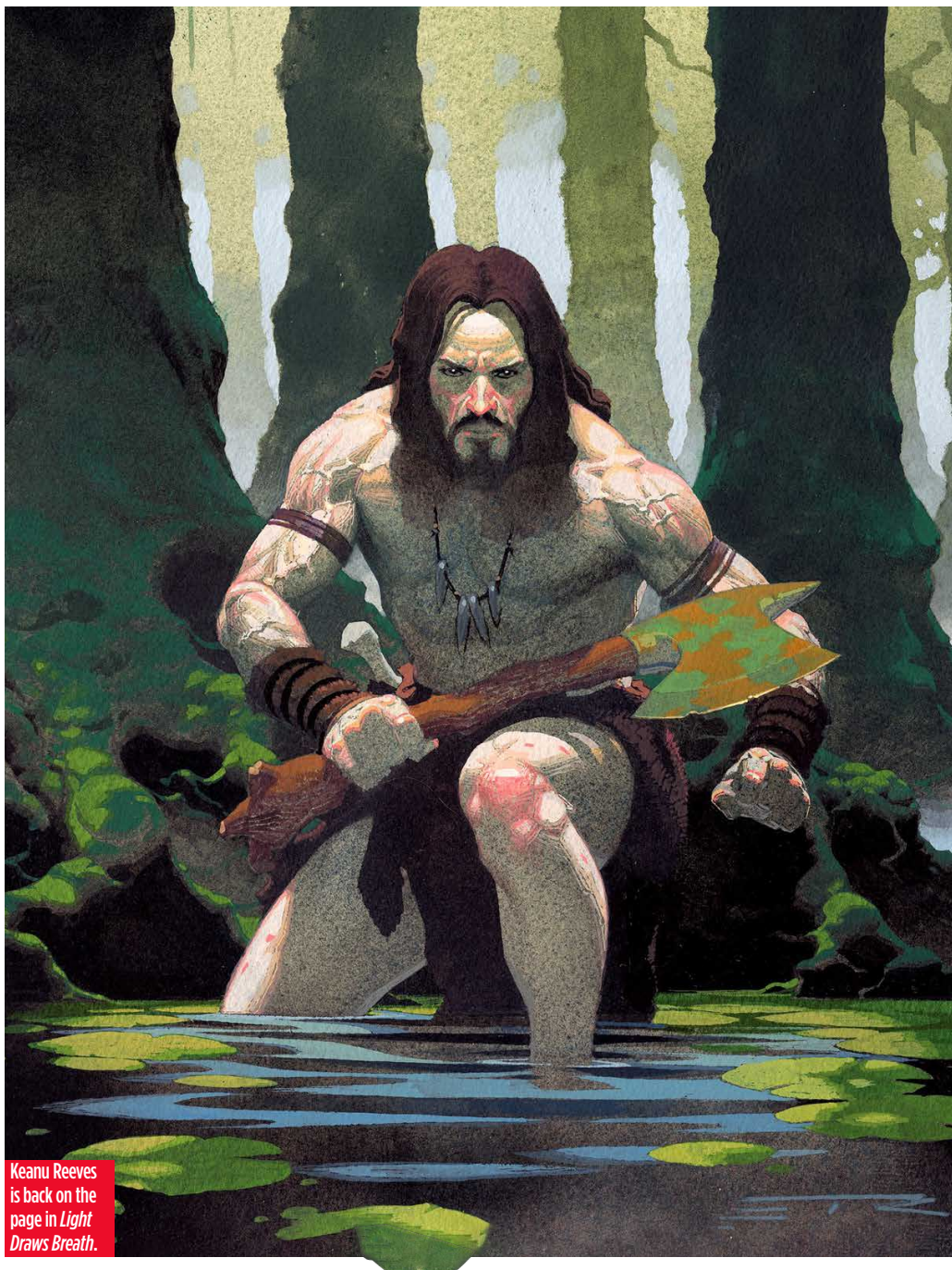
"Even before Keanu asked us to do this comic, Season and I had already been having fun kicking around ideas for BRZRKR and its lore," says Miéville. "So we knew immediately we were interested."

"From the time Keanu first approached China, we've been fans of the series, and daydreaming inside B's world fast became a major part of our household chatter," continues Butler. "So we jumped at the chance to ask some of our questions out loud."

While the novel takes place in its own reality, *Light Draws Breath* fits in with all the other BRZRKR titles to date. "*The Book Of Elsewhere* is a different version of B and the other characters," says Miéville. "It's not canon with the comics, whereas with this comic we wanted it to fit squarely in the continuity."

Opening around 300 CE during the Iron Age before exploring other epochs, *Light Draws Breath* combines real-life events and historical figures with some shadowy secret histories. "Those kinds of Easter eggs can be really enjoyable presents that maybe give a little fillip to readers who get them, but it absolutely doesn't matter if you don't," explains Miéville. "The story is completely self-contained; it's not a puzzle to unlock and you don't need any of the real history to enjoy it. That said, if, like me, you do happen to be a nerd who's interested in early alchemy, Brazilian mystics or Swahili poets, you might have a moment or two when you smile and say, 'Okay, I know who that is!'"

"What interested me about that setting – and the movement across periods – is the sense that knowledge and belief are always in flux," adds



Keanu Reeves is back on the page in *Light Draws Breath*.

Butler. "The figures we meet are trying to understand forces that exceed them, and that felt very close to the emotional core of the story. There's a kind of urgency to that search, whether we'd now call it alchemy, science or something else."

With Miéville warning, "we're entering minor spoiler territory here...", the 56-pager opens with B dying – as he often does – before some of his protoplasm is siphoned off by two rogue scientists, resulting in the birth of something new. "It's that gunk after some alchemical interventions that ends up entering the stage," teases Miéville. "The stuff of B, but in a decidedly distinct form. That doesn't mean

the story's not about renewal – because to some degree all of BRZRKR is about that – but it's maybe also about difference and change."

"Inheritance feels central to me, but not in a fixed or predetermined way," continues Butler. "We were interested in the tension between what you're made from and what you might become. How much your origins shape you, and where is there space to diverge from them? That ambiguity felt important and it's something readers can bring their own experiences to." ●

*BRZRKR: Light Draws Breath* is out on 20 May.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE



**PRAISING STAR TREK FOR** “always being ahead of its time when it comes to representation and pushing boundaries – from early moments that challenged norms to more explicit queer storytelling in later series”, actor Karim Diané has written “Klingons Don’t Flirt”. The short story features Jay-Den Kraag, the Klingon cadet he portrays in *Starfleet Academy*. Illustrated by artists Andrew Drilon and Katherine Shuda, it appears in IDW’s upcoming *Star Trek: Celebrations* anthology, which also includes tales featuring LGBTQIA+ characters from *Lower Decks*, *Voyager* and the Kelvin Universe.

“What really excited me was diving deeper into Jay-Den’s relationship with Kyle,” says Diané, referring to War College cadet Kyle Jokovich. “On the show, we see them come together but the comic allows us to slow down and really explore why they work so well. It’s a very tender, playful story about the differences between Klingon and human ‘mating rituals’ and how two people who approach love so differently can still meet each other in a way that feels completely right.”

Admitting that “their relationship in the show is full of potential but doomed to fail”, writer Ashley Cooper and artist Jack Lawrence examine *Lower Decks*’ Mariner and Jennifer’s more tempestuous affair. “There’s something in that tragedy that really resonates with me,” says Cooper. “Our story has as much action as it does heart and it focuses on a key moment in their relationship that we’ve never seen before.”

Teaming up with artist J Clarke, writer Meghan Fitzmartin was naturally drawn to *Voyager*’s Seven of Nine. “I wanted to celebrate how *Star Trek*’s crews always provide space to make each other better, which is especially true of Seven,” she explains. “When she pulled away from her family, the *Voyager* crew accepted her and taught her how to be human.”

Hailing from IDW’s *Star Trek* monthly, non-binary writer Ben Kahn was immediately fascinated by

# Going Boldly



Karim Diané joins the line up of IDW’s **Star Trek: Celebrations** for Pride

WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

non-binary ensign T’Lir. “Seeing a Vulcan say, ‘the gender binary is illogical’ made me cheer out loud!” laughs Kahn. “I’ve put the spotlight on them and their best friend, queer Andorian Lily Sato, a descendant of *Enterprise*’s Hoshi Sato. T’Lir getting to explore their gender presentation through fashion is a big part of the

story, which only works because of artist Mikael Lindeberg’s designs.”

Describing it as “a sweet sapphic romance”, Jamila Rowser and Helena Janečić focus on *Strange New Worlds*’ Nurse Chapel. “I’ve always been drawn to her boldness, determination and love of science,” says Rowser. “Our story highlights the power of queer love, both metaphorically and scientifically by showcasing the importance of its history.”

Declaring that he “would have loved to have seen more of their relationship,” Jarrett Melendez harks back to *Star Trek Beyond*’s reveal that Sulu was gay and married to a man. “When I was asked to write this story, I knew I wanted to reveal how Sulu and Ben met,” he says, praising artist Kiku Hughes. “Kiku really nailed the likenesses and beautifully sold the comedic moments with Bones, who is a big ol’ fuddy-duddy while romance is in the air around him.”

*Star Trek: Celebrations 2026 is out on 27 May.*

One of the variant covers, by Linnea Jalando-on.



More covers by Noah Dao (top) and Adelle Kincl.



**SCI-FACT!** In 2024’s *Star Trek* #19, written by Collin Kelly and Jackson Lanzing, T’Lir was revealed to secretly be an Organian.

Farmer's son  
Key learns his  
mother was a  
Gorotama star.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

## Game On!

Droners creators reunite for

**Dragon Striker** WORDS: TARA BENNETT

 AFTER YEARS OF creative collaboration, including on the animated sci-fi show *Droners*, French animation writer/creator Sylvain Dos Santos and director Charles Lefebvre are combining their talents again to present their French take on anime. *Dragon Striker* for Disney+ is an original, 2D animated action-adventure show produced by their new venture, La Chouette Compagnie.

Set in the land of Asteria, the series merges fantasy world-building with the kinetic energy of a fictional, magically-led soccer game called Gorotama. Lead character Key, a farmer's son, is obsessed with the game and just wants a chance to play. During a delivery trip to the city, he runs into a kindred spirit in newbie goalkeeper Ssyelle. Together, they get swept up into the hype around the Dragons vs

All-Stars match, which changes their lives forever.

Dos Santos tells Red Alert this is the third sports-centred animated show he's created, and that is definitely by design. "I think sport is ripe for the expression of friendships, and how to push your boundaries, push your limits," he explains. "It's really about character and working together."

In creating *Dragon Striker*, Dos Santos says he's finally pulling from his other passion, the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*. "I'm a Dungeon Master, so I like to say that I learned how to write by playing D&D," he says. "When you have players attending, they are waiting for you every week. You need to build a strong universe and tell strong stories. The [most fun] part is to create

this really complete and complex universe of characters with destiny and epic stakes."

He promises all of that and more in this fantasy world where some kids, especially Gorotama players, have amazing powers called tamas. "It's a part of their psychology and their emotions," he says of the players who train at the Kal Asterock school. "The world of Asteria and *Dragon Striker* is built around tamawielders and tamas."

Dos Santos says what's interesting, story-wise, is that tamas reveal a great deal about a character, even in how they control or conjure the powers when needed. "Show me your tama and I will tell you who you are," he says of how person and power intertwine. "For example,



Ssyelle can control time – handy in a goal.

have some elements that feel original, and we try to find a good balance in that.”

While Dos Santos and Lefebvre are both anime fans, they respectfully do not call *Dragon Striker* an anime show. “It’s not Japanese, so it’s not real anime,” Dos Santos clarifies. “It’s something that we blend together.”

Lefebvre says he hopes audiences will see that immediately with how they block and stage their action sequences. “It’s a project with a lot of intensity inside the matches to play with angles that are sometimes challenging to build,”

he says. “In the game, the thing that was really important, especially in the beginning, was to understand the mechanics about how the [players] use the tama and how that has an effect on the game. We can really see how this game takes on heat, and then it’s more visually striking. We play with this rule as much as we can, always bringing something new to watch and keep it entertaining.”

Personal stories also drive *Dragon Striker*, particularly Key’s journey of self-discovery that begins as soon as he finds out his deceased mother was a legendary Gorotama champion known as a Dragon Striker. “The journey of Key is trying to find himself,” Dos Santos teases. “At first, it’s by walking through the path of his mother. And of course, it’s really

“It’s really about character and working together”

great to follow the path of your elders and the legacy, but we really wanted at the end of this was for Key to find his own path.”

Just how long that will take depends on the response from audiences. “To be honest, we have at least five seasons,” Dos Santos reveals. “Our intention is for each season to explore a wider area of this world, so it’s Kal Asterock and then it will be Asteria, and so on, and so on.”

*Dragon Striker* is on Disney+ from 10 June.

Ssyelle is this girl that’s always stressed. She wants to handle everything, so she develops the tama of time control. Then there’s Oddward, who is very full of himself, and an illusion tama can multiply him.”

Visualising those tamas in action are Lefebvre and his animators. He made it his goal to push the look of the show into the fantasy realm, inspired by his love of videogames and Japanese fantasy. “I wanted to push that and blend it also with what I love, like streetwear fashion and medieval fantasy,” Lefebvre says. “I tried to blend all those elements to find something a little bit different. At the same time, you feel comfortable watching it. You



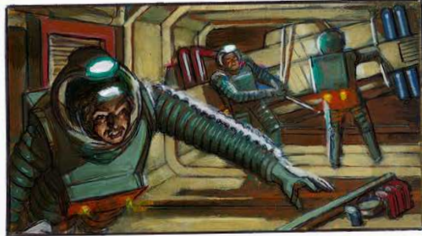
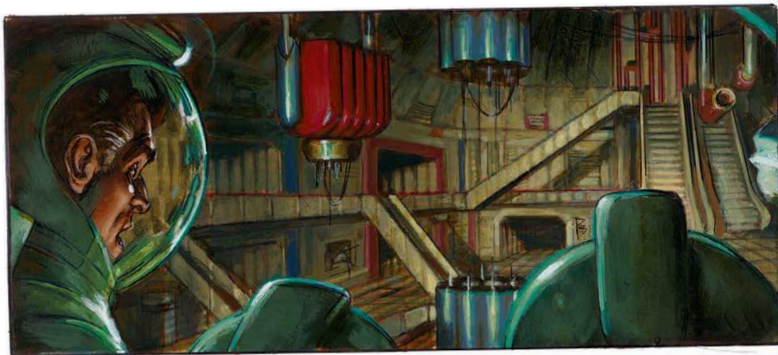
Kal Asterock, a magical city on a floating island.



Ssyelle (right) plays for a team called the Knights.

**SCI-FACT!** Award-winning videogame and anime composer Kevin Penkin (*Made In Abyss* and *Florence*) is scoring *Dragon Striker*.

► **SCI-FACT!** *The Trigan Empire* proved hugely popular in the Netherlands and was adapted in Dutch for two radio dramas.



*The Trigan Empire*, redrawn by Tom Foster.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

## Empire State Of Mind

A Brit comics classic returns in **New Adventures From The Trigan Empire** WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD

“I WAS PROBABLY FOUR OR FIVE years old the first time I saw *The Trigan Empire*,” recalls Michael Carroll. “Monsters and spaceships and swordsmen all in one comic strip! What’s not to love about that?”

*The Rise And Fall Of The Trigan Empire* debuted in *Ranger* in 1965 before finding its more familiar home in swot-friendly weekly *Look And Learn*, where it ran until 1982. Revered for the sumptuous art of Don Lawrence, it chronicled the history of the planet Elekton, fusing science fiction and fantasy with the aesthetics of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Now, this world of togas and tech is being revived in a new graphic novel from Rebellion,

who have already published a series of reprint volumes.

“First I had to read all the originals, which is no hardship,” says Carroll, best known for writing *Judge Dredd* and *Dreadnoughts*. “Mind you, it probably wasn’t wise to read them all in one go – over 1,600 pages! – because I emerged from that a bit shell-shocked, and quite convinced there was no way I could properly craft a respectful and respectable follow-up to those stories.

“But I love a challenge, and this was too good an opportunity to pass up. The editor Oliver Pickles

and I bounced quite a few ideas back and forth. Ultimately, we decided that jumping ahead a few decades would allow us to come in with a new focus. [Original characters] Trigo and Brag are now too old to be the action hero, and even Janno is pushing it, so they become the series’ elder statesmen.

“The younger characters have grown up with the Trigan empire already established. Their world and their worldview were shaped by the actions and adventures of their forebears, so naturally their own actions and adventures will be different...”

Artist on the first new Trigan Empire adventure in over 40 years is Tom Foster, a rising star of *2000 AD*. “The most important thing for me was for it to retain a spirit of adventure that didn’t feel too much the product of any one time,” Foster tells Red Alert. “I didn’t want a reader to pick it up and think, ‘This sort of thing doesn’t work in 2026.’ I think the best way to do that is avoid some of the slightly more dated visual language – pages overcrowded





CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

# Shining Light

Salvation's Child launches Paul Cornell's sci-fi comics company **Cosmic Lighthouse** WORDS: STEPHEN JEWELL

CONFIDENT HE KNEW "THE worlds of science fiction and fantasy and comics well enough to bring them together and create a reaction", Paul Cornell is now uniting the two mediums in Cosmic Lighthouse, his new comics company with Lee Harris and Anthony Cronin. Focusing on digital graphic novels by leading SFF authors set within the universes of their bestselling novels, it launches with *Salvation's Child* by writer Adrian Tchaikovsky and artist Mike Collins. It acts as a prequel to Tchaikovsky's *The Final Architecture* trilogy - the war with gargantuan aliens the Architects is a mere 50 years old at this early stage.

Consequently, the 110-pager makes for "an easy entry point to the series", even if that is not necessarily how Tchaikovsky designed it. "The original Architects' War that is history for most of the novels' characters, is a dynamic, traumatic episode in humanity's spacefaring history that shapes everything that happens after it," he explains. "Hence the graphic novel strikes a nice balance by giving new readers something they don't need a weight of background knowledge to understand and existing readers a window on something they've only heard about, but is clearly relevant to what they've read."

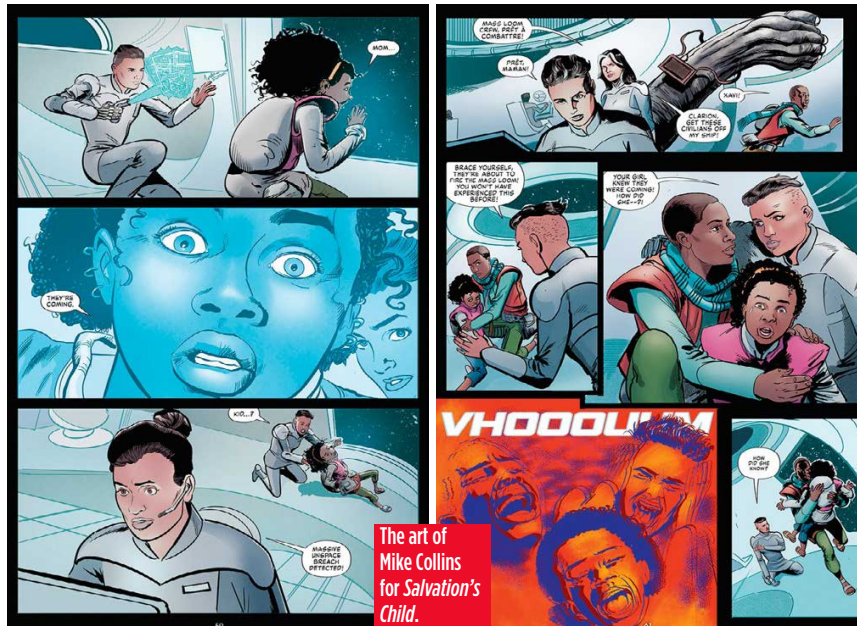
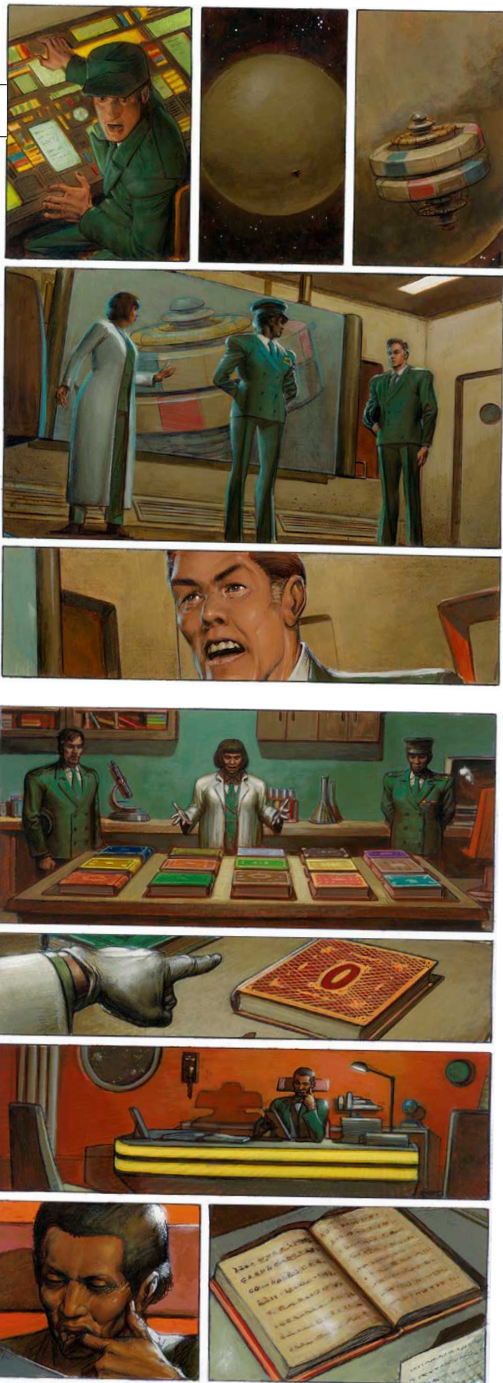
The story centres on the titular *Salvation's Child*, Xavienne Torino, and also introduces her mother, Marta. "Xavi was always a key figure in the setting, specifically because of what she does at the end of this book and how that then alters humanity's clash with the Architects - eventually leading to what

Idris, the hero(ish) of the books - achieves to end it," teases Tchaikovsky, referring to *The Final Architecture's* main protagonist. "Xavi is Idris's mentor, who kept him sane and taught him everything she knew. The bones of the story in *Salvation's Child* were always there in my head, but I never had the chance to explore the details. Marta, technically one of those details, was a real discovery - from someone who could just have been a background character to the main driving force - a normal, regular human viewpoint onto a universe of aliens and godlike monsters, and I'm not sure if her daughter is becoming one or the other."

Having listened to *The Final Architecture* audiobooks and grown fond of Solace, who reminded her of an "older, wiser" version of her *Doctor Who* character Ace, Sophie Aldred has allowed her likeness to be utilised by artist Mike Collins for clone army The Partheni. "Paul saw my long career of drawing likenesses as a boon in a story where several characters would have to be recognisably the same person at different ages," says Collins. "It was a pleasure working on a hard sci-fi comic with a scale that was at once intense and personal though simultaneously grand and cosmic."

"The Partheni are a force with an enormous potential for evil who are clinging onto virtue, but they're also soldiers," continues Tchaikovsky. "When they see Xavi, they see a weapon, and so they can't ever be on her side, whatever their aims." ●

*The Final Architecture: Salvation's Child* is out on 26 May.



The art of Mike Collins for *Salvation's Child*.

with tiny figures, panels with jagged borders - but also to work with practical materials in a fairly traditional style."

"Tom's work on bringing the story to life has been breathtaking," says Carroll. "He's channelled Don Lawrence's visuals, but greatly augmented them with his own experience and hugely impressive skills. He's managed to make a comic that feels like *The Trigan Empire* without being slavish to it."

The graphic novel is the first in a series. "It's safe to say that each book builds on the events of what has gone before. Sometimes a simple decision that felt right in the moment can turn out to be a seed that bears very bitter fruit!" ●

*New Adventures From The Trigan Empire Book 1* is out on 21 May.

► **SCI-FACT!** Adrian Tchaikovsky previously teamed up with artist Paolo Ongaro on a time-bending Dunkirk tale in 2020's *Commando* #5331.

Wonka's factory must have hefty ULEZ fines.



→ Animated feature **Charlie vs The Chocolate Factory** will see Kit Connor voicing the kid hero, with Taika Waititi as the genius confectioner. *The LEGO Batman Movie's* Jared Stern directs.



→ **Heart Eyes 2** – a sequel to last year's romantic slasher flick – is carving out a Valentine-friendly release date of 11 February 2028.

→ Preciousss... **The Lord Of The Rings: The Hunt For Gollum** will reunite

Andy Serkis, Ian McKellen and Elijah Wood, along with Lee Pace as Thranduil from *The Hobbit*.

Entering the Tolkienverse are Jamie Dornan as Strider/Aragorn, Leo Woodall as Halvard and Kate Winslet as Marigol.

→ Lena Headey, James Lance and original Brat Packer Andrew McCarthy are boarding the third season of **Wednesday**.

→ *The Boys* spin-off **Gen V** has been cancelled after two seasons. Prequel series **Vought Rising** is still on course for 2027.

→ *Andor's* Adria Arjona joins the cast of James Gunn's next Superman movie, **Man Of Tomorrow**. She's reportedly

playing Maxima, queen of the planet Almerac, a character first seen in the comics in 1989.

→ Osgood Perkins is bringing us a new horror tale set in the **Longlegs** universe. Nicolas Cage returns to star.

→ The fourth entry in **The Mummy** franchise will now be exhumed from the tomb on 15 October 2027.

→ **Star Wars: Maul – Shadow Lord** has won a second season.

→ *Creed II* and *Transformers: Rise Of The Beasts* director Steven Caple Jr will bring the **I Am Legend** sequel to the screen.

→ *Obsession's* Curry Barker will direct A24's reboot of **The Texas Chain Saw Massacre**.

→ Krysten Ritter, Finn Jones and Mike Colter return to defend NYC in **Daredevil: Born Again** season three.

→ *The Good Wife's* Julianna Margulies joins the cast of the third and final series of **Paradise**.

→ Charles Dance is in the frame for Matt Reeves's **The Batman: Part II**. He's rumoured to be playing the father of Harvey Dent, aka Two-Face.

→ *Sinners* and *Spider-Noir* star Li Jun Li joins the third season of **The Last Of Us**.

→ *Nightbitch* director/co-writer Marielle Heller will write and direct a live-action take on 1992 eco-fable **FernGully: The Last Rainforest**.

→ The Schwartz awakens in the freshly christened **Spaceballs: The New One**. Apparently it's "A Non-Prequel Non-Reboot Sequel Part Two but with Reboot Elements Franchise Expansion Film." Haven't we had enough of those?

→ *Alien: Earth's* Sydney Chandler will voice Nosferata in season two of DCU animation **Creature Commandos**.



PICTURES: NETFLIX, MARVEL/Disney

**SCI-FACT!** An original version of Lando Calrissian's Skiff Guard helmet sold at auction for \$15,000 in 2023.

NEW AUTHOR

## JOSEPH ECKERT

MEET THE WRITER  
BEHIND TIME-TRAVEL  
THRILLER *THE TRAVELER*



**Tell us about your protagonist.**

→ The narrator is everyman Scott Treder, who lives with his wife, Amy, and son, Lyle. Scott is quite average - someone even asks, "Why is this extraordinary event happening to someone so ordinary?" Scott doesn't have an answer. But Lyle is extraordinary, he goes through the most growth in the novel.

**Can you explain Scott's "time slips"?**

→ I can't explain the how without giving away the mystery. The what: Scott jumps forward at 7:52am each morning. The first time, he travels 24 hours. The next time, he travels two days. Then four days, then eight... The length of time keeps doubling.

**How long did the book take to write?**

→ The first draft took months. I finished that nearly 20 years ago. The particulars evolved, with a change in the second half that ties the story together. But the central hook has remained the same.

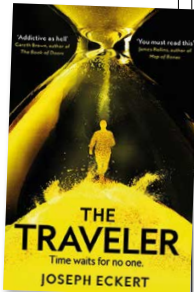
**Did you have to do much research?**

→ I read a lot of scientific projections into the future. What will happen to the continents millions of years in the future? What will happen to the Earth when the Sun enters its red giant phase? It was fascinating to imagine.

**Any advice for would-be authors?**

→ Don't give up. It will be a slog sometimes. You'll face moments when the excitement runs out and there's only the long road ahead. Keep at it.

*The Traveler is out on 11 June, published by Pan.*



## Revenge Of The Jedi →

Released for *Star Wars* Day, The Disney Store brings you The Endor Collection. No replica Leia outfit, sadly, but there are various shirts, backpacks, cups and, of course, Mickey Mouse ears. It's what George would've wanted. Sticking with the *ROTJ* theme, there's also a replica Lando Calrissian Skiff Guard helmet. Now you're talking!  
Visit [disneystore.co.uk](http://disneystore.co.uk)



## ← This Is The Time

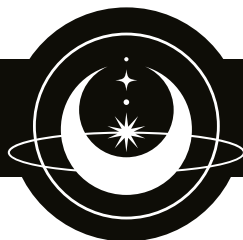
G-SHOCK, in partnership with Lucasfilm, are releasing two custom watches that pay homage to the Mandalorian and Grogu. The GM-2100 is reminiscent of Beskar steel, while the BA-110 Baby-G features a green colourway. Both watches come with a Bounty Hunter ID Card Watch Stand.  
Visit [gshock.com](http://gshock.com)

## Phone Armour →

Tech accessory brand CASETIFY has also teamed up with *The Mandalorian And Grogu* to release a range of phone and earbud cases, card holders, grips and stands, plus sleeves and holders for laptops and tablets.  
Visit [casetify.com](http://casetify.com)



## THE FINAL



## FRONTIER

### GERRY CONWAY 1952-2026

He unleashed the Punisher and killed Gwen Stacy

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



Gerry Conway pictured in December 2025.

“IN A VERY REAL SENSE, I was Peter Parker,” remembered Gerry Conway, who began writing Marvel’s flagship title *The Amazing Spider-Man* at the age of 19. “I was writing about my contemporary.”

Born in Brooklyn, New York City, this lifelong comics geek broke into the industry through “obnoxious persistence”, hustling editors while touring the DC offices as a fanboy. At 16 he made his first sale, a story in DC’s horror anthology *House Of Secrets*.

But Conway had his sights set on Marvel, favouring the company’s more emotional style of storytelling. Originally hired to assist Roy Thomas on a Ka-Zar script in *Astonishing Tales*, he went on to wrangle such big-hitters as the Hulk, the Fantastic Four and the Avengers as well as co-creating Ms Marvel and Ben Reilly, Peter Parker’s genetic clone.

Debuting in *The Amazing Spider-Man* 129, the Punisher was another Conway co-creation, a brutal, skull-emblazoned vigilante with a

fierce moral code. “I’d always wanted to create a character who thought he was a law unto himself.”

Conway’s stint with the web-slinger saw the death of Parker’s girlfriend Gwen Stacy in 1973. This controversial twist earned him the name “Killer” Conway. “The pretty horrendous backlash that I received from the fan press, and the lack of support I got from Stan [Lee], who said we did it behind his back, had a huge impact on me in terms of my emotional state,” he later recalled.

Returning to DC after this upset, Conway took on Superman, Batman and the JLA and co-created Firestorm and Jason Todd. He would go on to flip between the rival companies for the rest of his career.

Beyond comics he wrote two SF novels, *The Midnight Dancers* and *Mindship*, and worked as a writer and producer in Hollywood, earning credits on animated fantasy *Fire And Ice* (1983) and two episodes of *Batman: The Animated Series*. ●

### SID KROFFT 1929-2026

☞ The creative partner of younger brother Marty, Sid Krofft was born Cydus Yolas in Montreal, Quebec. At 15 he toured as a puppeteer with the Ringling Bros Circus and also performed in vaudeville.

In 1968 the Kroffts were hired by Hanna-Barbera to build the costumes for *The Banana Splits*. The experience encouraged them to produce their own brand of ultra-colourful, hyper-caffeinated, puppet-powered whimsy for TV. *HR Pufnstuf*, set on the surreal Living Island, arrived in 1969. A movie version was released a year later.

Other Krofft productions included *The Bugaloos* (1970), *Lidsville* (1971) and *Sigmund And The Sea Monsters* (1973-75). The more dramatic *Land Of The Lost* ran for three seasons from 1974 and became a movie in 2009. *Bigfoot And Wildboy* ran as part of *The Krofft Supershow* on Saturday mornings in 1977.

“Everything’s up on the screen,” said Sid. “Maybe that’s why we’re not rich!”



Sid Krofft with HR Pufnstuf, pictured in 2004.

### BARRIE TOMLINSON 1938-2026

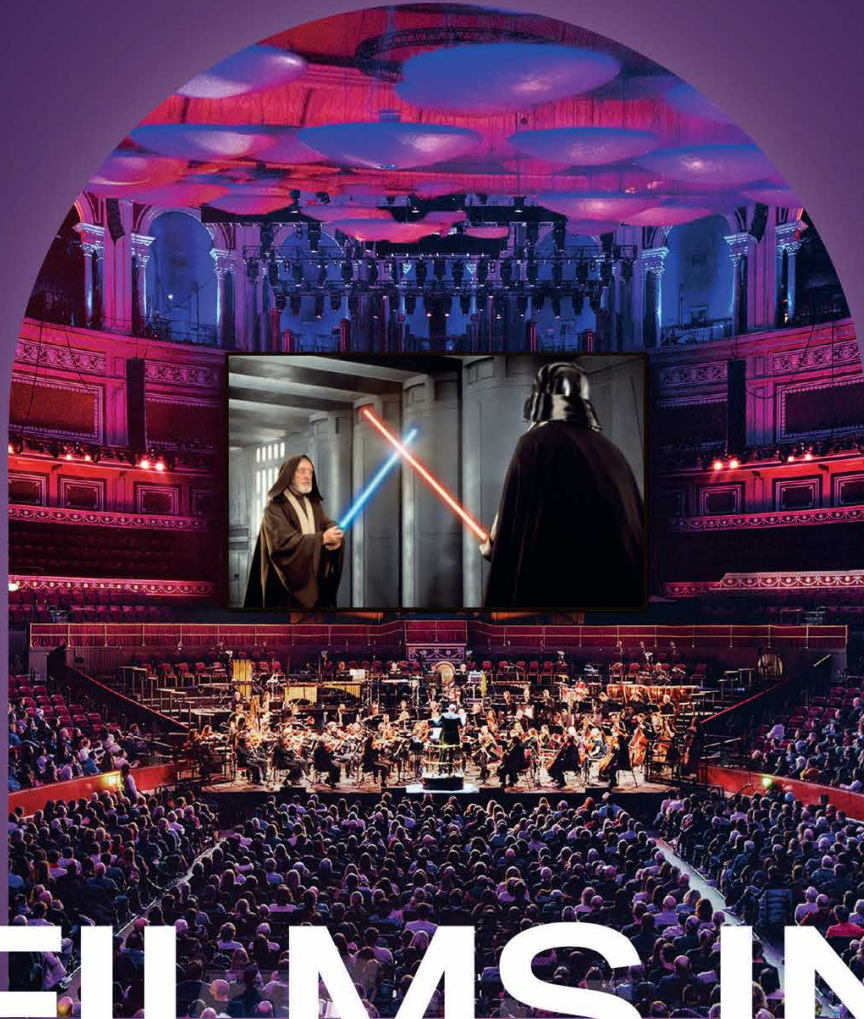
☞ A writer and editor with a gift for publicity, Barrie Tomlinson was a key figure in the golden age of British weekly comics.

Born in St Albans, he joined IPC in 1961, initially as a writer on *Lion* before editing sports-themed title *Tiger* in 1969. He built on the popularity of soccer strip *Roy Of The Rovers*, launching a best-selling comic of the same name in 1976.

Promoted to Group Editor for Sport and Adventure, Tomlinson oversaw *Battle Picture Weekly* and *2000 AD*. In 1982 he relaunched his childhood favourite *Eagle*, now showcasing the adventures of Dan Dare’s great-great-great-grandson along with photo-strip *Doomlord*. Tomlinson wrote the strips “Death Wish” and “Survival”.

Short-lived horror weekly *Scream!* arrived in 1984, followed by sci-fi title *Wildcat* in 1988. Tomlinson went on to write the strip *Scorer* for the *Daily Mirror*, contributing some 6,000 episodes over 22 years.

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# SEX





# THE VAMPIRE LESTAT

The Vampire Lestat showrunner Rolin Jones gets inside Lestat's head in season three

WORDS: TARA BENNETT



OVE OVER LOUIS DE POINTE DU LAC; Lestat de Lioncourt is ready to hold court over humanity. For two seasons of AMC's *Anne Rice's Interview With The Vampire*, the 266-year-old vampire (in the Immortal Universe) has primarily been a supporting character in the telling of Louis's (Jacob Anderson) fraught transition from human New Orleans brothel owner to angst-ridden vampire.

However, the third season of the series is giving the hedonistic, bad boy vamp from Auvergne the spotlight, and even a new title: *Anne Rice's The Vampire Lestat*. Picking up in 2025, about two years after Armand (Assad

Zaman) turned Daniel Molloy (Eric Bogosian) and published Louis's life story as the tell-all *Interview With The Vampire*, Lestat (Sam Reid) now leads a public life as the frontman of the band Satan's Night Out. Yet he remains livid about Louis's characterisation of him in the book, so he agrees to let Molloy film his concerts and interview him for a documentary to correct the record.

Featuring a 180-degree shift in tone from previous seasons, *The Vampire Lestat* sources its story from Rice's book of the same name, but mixes it all up into a brash, non-linear melange of concert performances, period piece flashbacks to his human past and Lestat's

Louis (Jacob Anderson) is not in a good way.



Lestat takes the lead in the show's third season.

prickly relationships in the present. Creator/showrunner Rolin Jones tells *SFX*, "There was some part of me that was always excited about this book, because no one had done it, right? There wasn't a massive movie to compare it to," he says of this season's autonomy as an adaptation.

"There was this set idea about how to go about it, and to honour the whatever you want to call it – 'whiplash' – of the tone difference. She set the table for us, right?" Rolin says of their taking cues from Rice's text. "[Lestat] sounds different than Louis. He approaches life different than Louis. It's not just necessarily in the words; it's also in content and form and



## new dawn

### Sam Reid on Lestat's relationship with Daniel

"Lestat is pissed off about Daniel Molloy. He's brought him into his world because he can. But up to the third episode, that's the end of the way that relationship was set up. It sets them off into different trajectories, and their relationship evolves in a different way. Molloy is not to Lestat what he is to Louis, where he's digging through the facade. Lestat doesn't really allow that to happen, and actually feels like he's got something to teach Molloy, as [Daniel] isn't embracing his vampiric nature as well as he should."

colouring and music and everything. If he's at the controls, you're going to feel and try to experience what it's like to be him. That's the glory of Anne's writing: how she managed to put you inside the body of a vampire. That should be weird enough, but he's quite an eccentric personality too. You know less Lestats in your life than you do Louises, probably."

Lestat will also prove to be a much tougher nut to crack when it comes to telling his story truthfully to Molloy, meaning Jones has shaped the season to make the audience just as invested in piecing together the vampire's life as the jaded journalist/vampire. "The unreliable narrated part of the whole thing is slightly upped a little bit," Jones says of how things get revealed. "There are some times where [Lestat] is like, 'This thing happened and no, this didn't happen.' But mostly it's just degrees of what you're willing to admit. How you like the world to see you, and the baby steps of truth he can get away with and still be private.

"I think Lestat has a pretty sharp memory," Jones says. "I think he could probably tell you who was in the room and what was being said. There's a bias sometimes from his own point of view. Or, it's just a lot of body armour with the, 'Oh, I'm over it. Oh, give me a break,' and all that kind of shit. But as we go through the episodes, we start hammering away at that particular idea."

### THE ROCK GOD

The other storytelement elements that sets season three apart is the music. Lestat sings in every episode, be it an intimate moment at the piano or a theatrical banger on stage. Almost all of the compositions are original creations by →



In his rock-star  
guise – but  
some scars  
remain.

# SOUND BITE!

Sam Reid steps up to the mic as Lestat de Lioncourt takes centre stage in season three

**This season, it's clear that Lestat is centred in everything and Sam the actor is working harder than ever. Were you ready?**

The show has always asked a lot of us, yeah, but you can't ask for anything more than that in life. It's such an extraordinary gift to give all of us as actors this beautiful dialogue and this really wild plot. It's really opera on a very, very large scale. We have this huge creative licence because they are these monsters and immortal beings, playing it on a really big level. It's a joy, really.

**Is there a true north version of Lestat, that you build everything out from?**

The great thing about having the books is that I have that character there, so I can always tap back into that. But I think you do need to remember there's certain truths about Lestat that Anne Rice was really adamant on. He is a character who will get kicked down, but stands back up and puts his best foot forward. He's a man of action.

One of the fundamental things is the sense that he's so mercurial. There's no real thread, and I feel like it's going wrong if he's following too direct a path. So I'm constantly trying to surprise myself and to feel on the edge of the unknown as well – and I feel like that *is* Lestat. This season, he does understand more fundamental things about himself that perhaps he's choosing not to address. But he has no choice but to address them, particularly when you get to the final episode. There's a very rude awakening for him. So my true north is no north. It's like north, south, west and east at the same time.

**Lestat presents many different versions of himself depending on his audience. Is he ever honest about himself?**

It has been easier than the previous seasons to really define, *this* is a point of view Lestat. There has to be elements [of truth] in season one when he's going through Louis's point of view because their love story is real, and their love is real. And I think Louis would remember him in elements of truth. But this season, it's a bit different because he's reflecting on his own self, and you can't really hide from yourself. I think you can be surprised by yourself, but you can't really hide. What I found really great this season was to play the quiet moments when he's processing what he's just done. Like, he's made the joke that you would usually cut away from, and then you see it land on him, and maybe it's not as satisfying as he had hoped. He has more self-reflection this year.

**Lestat's whole countenance changes in the company of his birth mother/fledgling, Gabriella. How did you work that out with Jennifer Ehle?**

Jennifer is an extraordinary actor and is totally fearless. It was a wonderful experience to not be the one driving the scene; to have a more powerful and more forceful character driving the scenes. You watch Lestat sort of trip around it, trying to find his footing in that space because she's so unnerving to him. He loves her so deeply because she is his mother. There's no bond that is deeper, but it's been tainted for so long. We're always playing this mother/son/maker/fledgling sort of situation. Jennifer and I could push it one way and pull it back the other.

Then there's this whole dynamic that Lestat's formative years have been idolised and sexualised. He's been loved by his mother, but he's been loved in a way that puts all of his sense of self-worth and identity into his erotic value. It's a very messy, complicated relationship, but you understand so much more about Lestat. I'm glad they went there, but it's hard to watch, I imagine.

**Another important collaborator in expressing Lestat is composer Daniel Hart with his songs. How did you work together?**

Daniel is an absolute artist. He's very specific about how he wants the songs to sound. He's also giving Lestat a brand-new voice that I hadn't had before in previous seasons. I've been working very closely with him, learning more about the character and expanding the character through his work. It's been really joyful because he is a musician, and this is his world, his element. I'm an actor, and I'm still learning about all of this stuff. It's great to be able to feel sort of infantile in a room, trying to find my feet, and having such a wonderful guide in him.

**Whose idea was it to do a concert performance at New York's Beacon Theatre?**

We talked last year about if I would be open to doing a concert and I said, "Yeah!". I'm doing all the songs live in the show. We've done so much work on the music that it would be a shame to *not* do that because there's been so much rehearsal. But I imagined I would be playing one or two songs at a small party. So when they came to me [asking], "What do you think about the Beacon Theatre?", it was a bit like, "Oh... okay." I just went there today, and it's a mind-blowing space. I'm excited.

series composer Daniel Hart, who was welcomed into the writers' room to help them break the season.

"There was a song in episode three that he dropped about Magnus," Jones says of the number Hart wrote about Lestat's sire. "Clearly it clicked open what I think is probably, arguably, the most beautifully shaped episode this year. Because of this very weird song, it gave the structure for the episode, and gave a journey."

Jones says that in a singular way, the songs informed the scripts, and it took everyone a while to adjust. "These scripts are sometimes underwritten and overwritten in ways that are probably scary for people who are reading the script. But I know the songs and I know what they're about to elicit," he explains. "They're not necessarily telling forward story. But when those songs happen, what the events are correlating around, they really change things. That's the gift that keeps giving and giving and giving."

"The two guarantees this year of uncompromising, singular work in American television are Sam Reid and Daniel Hart," Jones praises. "You can't believe they are happening in the same season."

Outside of Molloy's interviews, season three also sets up a clever way of allowing Lestat to tell his own story via a series of his vocal remembrances pressed to vinyl, called *The Failures*. When and where he recorded them for posterity is part of their mystery.

"That is a very interesting exercise," Jones says how they're used as voiceover in the episodes. "Many things must have gone very, very poorly, and he's probably sitting there because he's friendless at this point. There is a sort of let the tale seduce you [vibe]."

Jones says as the season progresses, so too will the candour of Lestat's recorded musings. "As he starts getting deeper and deeper into it, that becomes active in the way that the Dubai thing was – and potentially more interesting. We talked a lot about Lestat as interviewer of himself, and we just smashed him in the face every week, over and over and over again, until →



Jennifer Ehle reunites with showrunner Rolin Jones.

## “Lestat will get kicked down, but stands back up and puts his best foot forward”

language would start failing him and he started to reconcile with all that shit. That's the only way you're going to get to the sweet centre of Lestat. You're going to have to go through a contradictory and ever-changing definition of what he's up to because he's suspicious and vaguely not interested in his personal history. So it just starts confronting him left and right.”

The theme of failure looms large for Lestat this season too. As a rock god he exudes bravado and confidence on stage, but inside he wrestles with knowing that he and his music are out of time and touch with the human audience he's playing to on tour. “In a very endearing way, we all have that thing that you work really hard at and it fails,” he says. “For most of us in the writers' room, it was pretty easy. Then when we were having conversations with Sam and our actors, every single one of the broken toys that make up the cast and crew of our show talked about failure as these attempts where you really threw your heart out and it just wasn't working. It was very familiar for everybody.”

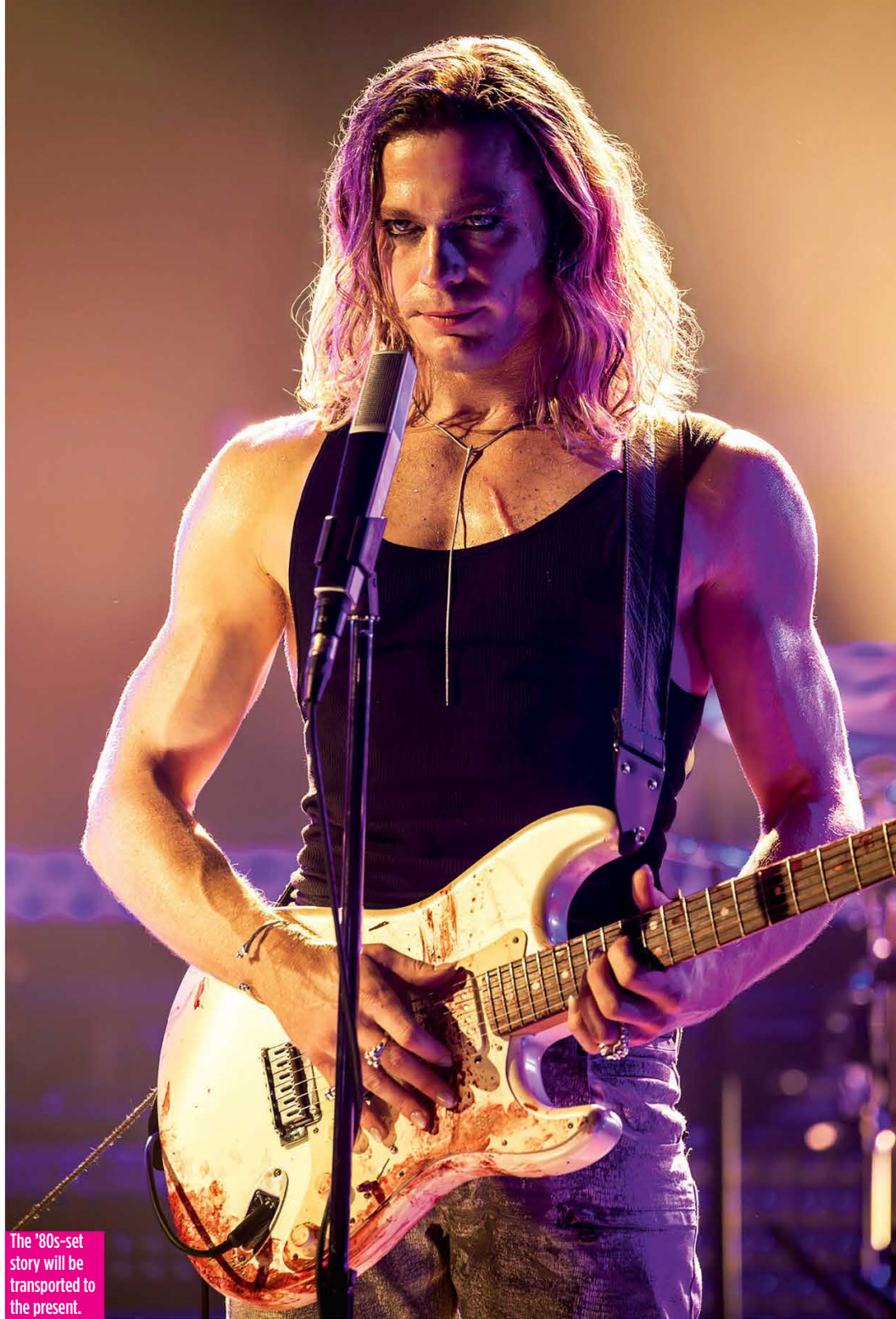
Jones continues, “The beautiful gift is taking this book that was made in the '80s, when it should have been David Lee Roth and Jon Bon Jovi, putting that here and now – a genre of music no one could give a shit about – in a world that is obsessed with their cell phones. Even the fact that vampires are alive among us, people are like, ‘Yeah, are they? Who cares.’ Those were the two things that we thought would be the most assaulting for Lestat to have to deal with, and that was our way into how to make it.”

### ESTRANGED FAMILY

In Rice's book *The Vampire Lestat*, Louis de Pointe du Lac remains on the narrative sidelines until the very end, but Jones says he wasn't willing to do that to actor Jacob Anderson – or Delainey Hayles, who played Claudia until she was executed during a vampire trial last season.

“The big decisions about Jacob and Delainey were I had incredible actors, so why would I abandon my actors?” Jones says of the inclusion of their characters. “Have I touched everything that this actor can do? No, I have not, so easy-peasy. Okay, what are we gonna do?”

Jones teases that Louis will have his own pursuits involving the Talamasca as he remains persona non grata with Lestat for a while. “In [Lestat's] voiceover, he calls him Mr du Lac, and that should be a very clear road



The '80s-set story will be transported to the present.

for everybody that things are still a little frosty, you know what I mean?” he chuckles.

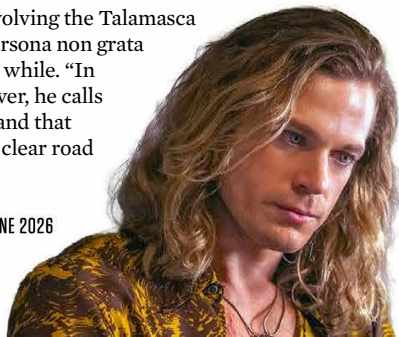
“And then you can't just revisit Claudia,” he says. “There's got to be some other things going on so we built some stuff that I can't get into. Obviously we wanted some sort of drive to get Louis and Lestat back together again. But that could never be easy, so we had to put him through an equivalent wringer.”

While Lestat is the prime preening provocateur on stage this season, *The Vampire Lestat* welcomes several female vampire characters who are going to have major impact on his story. The already announced

Akasha (Sheila Atim), mother of all vampires and lead in Rice's book *The Queen Of The Damned*, will make herself known.

Then there's Gabriella (Jennifer Ehle), Lestat's human birth mother, who he turns when she's dying of consumption. “Why bring in Gabriella? I think that the easy version would be, this will tell you why Lestat was the person that you experienced for the first two years,” Jones says of the character. “She'll be the clue to all that. But that's sort of the first level of the bean dip, and then you gotta get that tortilla chip and just dig deeper in it.”

Jones says he had worked with Ehle before on an AMC pilot and the show *Low Winter Sun*,





Three seasons in, this show still has some bite left.



## BODY LANGUAGE

### Building a vampire

"Sam spent so much time in the physicality of his performance in season two, which was all about stealing little manoeuvres of Jacob, like his body language. I think he was finally ready to go, 'Okay, put it on my shoulders. I'm ready to do this. I saw the tortuous hell you put Jacob through for two seasons - my turn now.' There was a lot of talk about stamina, and taking exquisite care of his body. They should put him and [basketball player] LeBron James together and talk about 'How do we do it? How do we make *that*?'"

so he knew her talents. When they were reviewing actors for Gabriella, Ehle popped up on their list. "I saw Jen's name, and it was over," he says. "She was available so I called her up. And am I not secretly giggling that Lizzy Bennet [Ehle played her in the BBC's 1995 *Pride And Prejudice* miniseries] is about to do all these things? There are some Jennifer Ehle gifs that are about to happen that will haunt her to the grave."

All joking aside, Jones says Gabriella is going to throw Lestat's life upside down in a really delicious way. "There's the cycle of the DNA shit that you receive, the nurture/nature stuff, that gets particularly mixed up and confused in

vampire world," he explains. "The three things that are unsettling for [Lestat] is no one gives a shit that the vampires are alive, no one cares about fucking rock and roll, and Mom's back for the first time in 100 years.

"Those are the first three ingredients you bring to how are you going to spiral out Lestat, or dig deeper into him," Jones continues. "This is the only person that knew him well on Earth when he was young, and has known him as a vampire. She has a particular set of data. Like all of us who have particularly intimate relationships with our mothers, they have the ability to grab onto our spine and shake it just by staring at us. She is just another tsunami force that you want to put in because, in theory, he wants to tell you the story why Lestat would [normally] walk in any room, and take over the room. But the inverse is happening this year. She's the most powerful tool to crack him open, but she's delivering her own real estate for herself too."

Jones alludes to another female character of importance coming towards the end of the season as well. "The ecosystem will finally be balanced by a theoretical season four where there will be just as many high-presenting lady vampires as there are dudes," he jokes.

He hopes that AMC greenlights a fourth season so he can finish out Lestat's arc across two seasons. In the meantime, Jones is adapting John Steinbeck's *The Grapes Of Wrath* for AMC, and he'll wait to hear like the rest of us. "I think everybody wants that to happen, but *Wrath* is special gift they gave us, and I'm trying to do the same thoughtful work that we try to do on the vampire show." ●

*The Vampire Lestat* is on AMC and AMC+ from 7 June. UK details TBC.



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STEVEN SPIELBERG'S BACK  
ABOARD A UFO BLOCKBUSTER.  
TIME TO OPEN THE FILE ON  
**DISCLOSURE DAY**  
WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD

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Emily Blunt  
and Josh  
O'Connor  
team up.

NE SECOND,” SAYS DAVID KOEPP, CATCHING SIGHT OF HIS IMAGE ON OUR video call. “I’m just realising these look like horns...”

He leaves his chair and goes to the shelf behind him, adjusting the placement of a two-pronged ornament that’s given him a distinctly demonic halo.

“I’ve just moved into this office so I’m still getting things right,” Koeppe shares as he returns. He scrutinises the screen, finally satisfied that he no longer looks vaguely possessed. “Sorry, I’ve wasted our time, but I feel better.”

It seems an amusing, off-the-cuff moment. But maybe it’s more than that. A sign, a portent, perhaps. One of the tantalising teaser posters for *Disclosure Day*, Koeppe’s latest screenwriting assignment, shows a pair of antlers superimposed above the head of star Josh O’Connor. It’s tempting to say, “This means something”, just like Richard Dreyfuss sculpting a mound of mashed potato in the shape of Devils Tower.

Encased in mystery since it was announced to the world two years ago, *Disclosure Day* attracts this kind of thinking. Online whispers insist it’s a stealth sequel to 1977’s *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*. It’s not. Unless it is. Another, even wilder theory

Colin Firth as Noah, head of the Wardex corporation.



O'Connor as Wardex whistleblower Daniel Kellner.



Eve Hewson's Jane finds herself in a spot of bother.



Even at 79, Spielberg's focus remains absolute.



Colman Domingo's corporate defector Hugo.

Koepp gestures to the framed poster of 1933's *King Kong* that hangs on his office wall. "I have that behind me for inspiration. It's a fantastic film. I saw it as a kid and it just engraved itself on my mind. I think that happened with Steven and UFOs early on in life. It's the ultimate mystery box, because it still hasn't been opened. This movie is about the process of trying to open it."

### THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

Koepp came onboard when Spielberg handed him a "40 or 50-page" treatment he'd written, based on his own original idea. "It started in media res, and you're immediately moving in the story. It was great classical storytelling in that regard. Here are the heroes of this movie. Here's what they want. Now care about it. And I did. Of course, the subject matter is fascinating, but the strength of the story is what really got me.

"My test of 'Should I work on something?' is, 'Does my mind swim with ideas or not?' and it definitely did on this."

Fittingly, the finer details of the plot are firewalled tighter than the contents of Area 51. This much, at least, is unredacted: O'Connor plays Daniel Kellner, a cyber-security expert in possession of a world-changing secret.

"He's a person who has stolen information from people who are in a position to know, and who are gatekeeping that information," Koepp tells *SFX*. "And he wants to get it out. The entire story takes place as he tries to get it out, and various forces try to stop him."

Those forces include Colin Firth as Noah Scanlon, head of the Wardex corporation, contracted by the powers that be to protect the truth at all costs. But there are allies, too. Kellner's crusade brings him into the orbit of Emily Blunt's Margaret Fairchild, a Kansas City weather presenter who experiences →

made", it was nevertheless a proof of concept for the transcendent *Close Encounters. ET The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *War Of The Worlds* (2005) showed the stars could deliver sweetness or devastation. Even the briefly streaking fireball glimpsed above the Orca in *Jaws* suggested an unshakable fascination with all that waits in the heavens.

"Why do the things obsess us that obsess us?" asks Koepp, one of Hollywood's most in-demand screenwriters and a trusted creative lieutenant to Spielberg ever since 1993's *Jurassic Park*. "There were childhood experiences that were very meaningful to him. Even at 79, his sense of wonder is absolutely undiminished, maybe increased. This is one of those things that seized him when he was a boy, looking up at the stars in Phoenix, Arizona. I think we have grooves in our brain that are formed between the ages of maybe 14 and 24. The movies that I love, the things that made their impressions on me, are the things that I am still obsessed with."

pegs it as a clandestine, government-bankrolled vehicle to disseminate the truth about extraterrestrial life (more on that later, if the authorities don't get to you first).

One thing is certain. It's a movie that not only marks Steven Spielberg's return to the summer blockbuster arena, but the subject that provides a shimmering thread throughout his entire filmmaking career: the skies, and the secrets they hold. In a way, it feels as profoundly autobiographical as his most recent film, 2022's *The Fabelmans*.

At 17 he made *Firelight*, charting an alien incursion in Arizona. Dismissed by Spielberg himself as "one of the five worst films ever



A little girl experiences her own close encounter.

# BELIEF SYSTEM

Who can you trust?



For David Koepp, the truth is out there. And so is the BS.

“What became clear to me, the more I researched, the more I read, the more people I talked to, is that what is undeniable is the United States and other governments have information they’ve suppressed. You can read it – ‘Hey, let’s make sure we hide this!’ There’s no doubt about it. [It’s been going on] for 79 years.

“What happens when you suppress information – which may turn out to be innocuous, or easily explained – is that if you say, ‘No, you may not see that’, we’re human beings and our minds run away from us. We fill in the blanks for you. Concealing information builds a wildfire around it.”

While developing the script, Koepp dug deep into UFOlogical lore. “It wasn’t hard to find research materials,” he says, wryly. “It was hard to find good ones. There’s a tremendous amount out there. There’s books, some serious, some not. Documentaries, some good, some not. Individuals, some honest and forthcoming, others fabulists who are looking to get famous and rich, or just want a little attention.

“There’s a lot to go through. I saw a lot of documentaries and I read a lot. Then the real danger is once you start looking around on the internet, that is a rabbit hole you can go *all* the way down. So, plenty of material, plenty of people willing to talk. The question is, where do you put your credibility?”

Answers on a crashed weather balloon...

a bizarre incident live on air, uttering guttural clicking noises that sound unsettlingly like an alien tongue.

“She is touched by that information and she has a connection to that information that she is unaware of. The process of her story dovetailing with Josh O’Connor’s story was one of the significant and fun structural challenges that I had. You’re developing these stories in parallel and bringing them together as the movie goes on, and figuring out, ‘Are they connected? If so, how – and why?’”

*Disclosure Day* arrives during renewed fascination with the UFO phenomenon, stoked by the testimonies of alleged government whistleblowers and the existence of Pentagon-sanctioned footage of military aircraft encountering what appear to be unknown fellow travellers in the sky. Last year saw the release of *The Age Of Disclosure*, a documentary claiming to provide evidence of humankind’s contact with aliens. Does it feel like a perfect storm of public interest?

“I could do with the storm holding offshore for another couple of months!” laughs Koepp. “The congressional hearings that [former US intelligence official] David Grusch and many others testified at were going on while we were writing, or had just occurred. I remember us watching it together and taking notes, getting ideas. Public interest in disclosure and the disclosures of those who have information have all increased over the course of developing, shooting and editing this film.

“Even a month ago, former President Obama and the current occupant of the White House

both talked openly about it. So yeah, there’s this wave of public interest which I really hope holds off and crests in June, rather than tomorrow!”

Does he genuinely feel paranoid that proof of aliens will arrive before the film gets a sniff at the box office? “I do! I’m afraid somebody’s going to do that! I mean, we’re superstitious in Hollywood. But this seems like a legitimate fear – oh no, somebody better not go and spill the beans too quick! They’ve held off for 79 years so I don’t imagine it’s coming...”

As Koepp reveals, it wasn’t any hot-button topicality that drew Spielberg to tell this story in 2026. “It’s been brewing in his mind for decades. I don’t think he picked now because he thought this was a moment where it’s rising in the public interest. I think he felt like, ‘I have some time, the story is a little clearer in my head now, let me see if I can write it down.’ I don’t know that it was to do with anything going on publicly. I think that’s probably coincidental. Then again, we all live in the same stew, so possibly so.”

## I WANT TO BELIEVE

The development process saw Koepp and Spielberg extrapolate the likely real world impact of disclosure.

“We would talk to each other and speculate. ‘Okay, what happened when the printing press was invented? What happened when some

medical breakthrough occurred?’ We were looking at instances of sudden dramatic change. The internet, obviously. Now we’re living in another one with the dawn of AI.

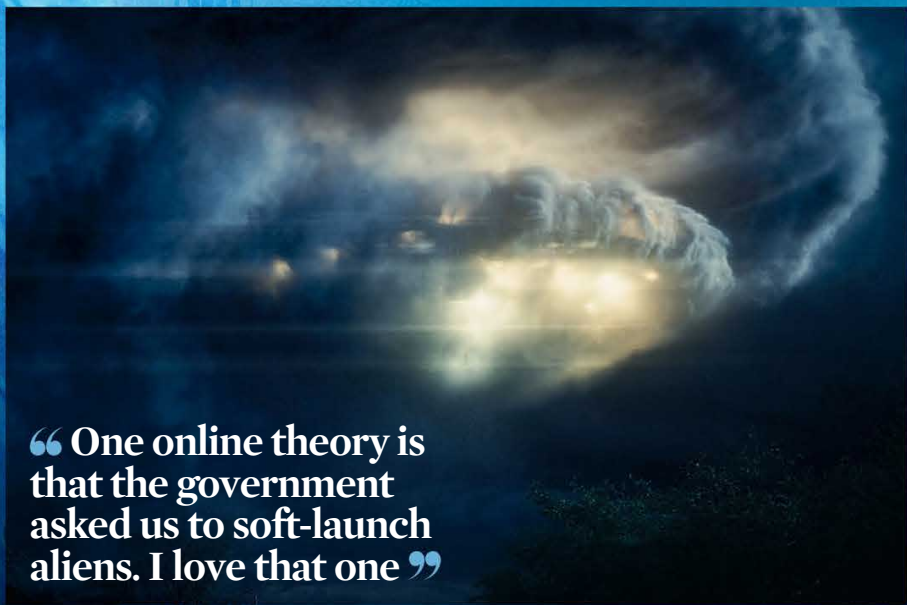
“What happens? How are different industries affected? How are belief systems affected? Obviously the Catholic church didn’t handle heliocentrism very well. Saying the sun maybe stood still and we moved around it got a lot of people killed. There was a sudden, violent reaction. I think the fear that would occur again is valid. Humans don’t do well with abrupt change. Paradigm shifts are destabilising and people get hurt.”

Koepp shares Spielberg’s fascination with the subject, proof or no proof. “Unsolved mysteries are a great lure,” he acknowledges. “I was raised Catholic, fell away as a teenager and now I’m an agnostic, which I think is the only reasonable approach to religion. I don’t know if there is a God. It’s possible. I haven’t seen it.

“I have the same feeling about extraterrestrial life. Of course, it’s possible. I haven’t seen it, but I keep my mind open to the possibility. As human beings we have limited senses, and they’re fairly crude. We can see things, but only between 4,000 and 7,000 angstroms. A limited range. We can hear things, but again in a limited range. Our dogs can hear more than we can. So we developed tools in the last 100 or 200 years – 600 if you want to count




Margaret’s car gets dragged along by a train.



“One online theory is that the government asked us to soft-launch aliens. I love that one”

That looks an awful lot like a UFO emerging from a cloud...



a lot,” says Koepp. “Nobody gets through life without their shirt-tails getting a little muddy. You experience pain and loss. Steven’s a very focused person, as you can imagine. He [couldn’t] accomplish as much as he does without being so. This is the fifth movie he’s directed that I’ve written. I’ve always known him to be focused, but this was a different level of focus. This was an intensity I had not seen in him before.”

And just what drove this intensity? “That he’s done films in this area before. He wants this one to be different, and as good. And it mattered. It really mattered to him. When it’s an idea you’ve carried around in your head for 20, 30, 40 years – who knows how long? – there’s a desperate urge to not get it wrong. [He’s thinking] ‘I’m finally getting a chance to tell this. I’m finally going to get it out of my head and onto the screen. I want it to be right.’”

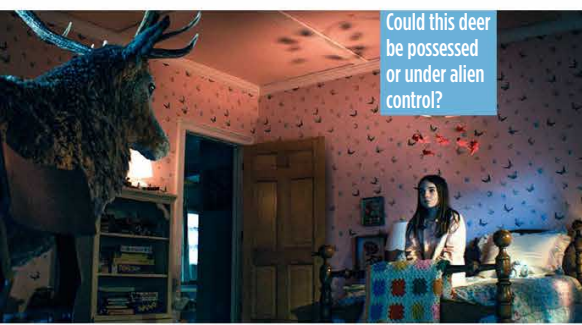
Time, if we dare, to address that wild rumour from the more conspiratorial corners of the internet. *Disclosure Day* is more than just a movie; it’s preparing the population of the world for the real deal. Complete with true life footage of aliens, prised from the deepest official vaults.

“I love that one!” Koepp beams. “My favourite that I read was that the government was financing this film and got Steven to do it because he’s loved and trusted by the public. They felt that this information needed to get out and they were soft-launching it in entertainment form so that we could handle it, because otherwise we’ll all freak out. That’s a well worked out internet conspiracy theory and I love it! I will say I was never contacted by a member of the government on this.”

He’s never had a visit from the Men in Black, then?

“I have not. Unless I was neuralysed and don’t remember.” ●

*Disclosure Day* is in cinemas from 12 June.



Could this deer be possessed or under alien control?

Emily Blunt as Kansas City meteorologist Margaret.

he allows himself to tell the story in a different way and avoid repeating himself. We all want to work with the material we want to work with, and you’re interested in what you’re interested in, but changing your approach and the style of it is really smart.”

One genre in particular was a touchstone. Intriguingly it’s a style of filmmaking Spielberg originally intended for *Close Encounters*, before the story became the tale of a Midwestern everyman rather than a deep state conspiracy. “I saw this more as a ’70s paranoid thriller,” Koepp tells *SFX*. “I wanted to write something that maybe Alan Pakula [director of *The Parallax View* and Watergate drama *All The President’s Men*] would look down and smile on. That was my mindset.”

Spielberg is revisiting his lifelong fascination at the age of 79. He’s always been a technical genius, instinctively gifted, knowing the power of a slow close-up as much as a moment of widescreen wow. But is Hollywood’s one-time wunderkind watching the skies in a different way now? What does he bring to this subject as he nears his ninth decade?

“Certainly there’s the emotional perspective of someone who’s lived longer and has seen

the telescope – to help us see things that we cannot see. But those tools are also limited.

“We tend to assume aliens exist in some sort of bodily, humanish form, but why? Maybe they exist here and now and we are unable to perceive them. Given all those possibilities, I think you’d be foolish not to be interested in this subject.”

### RUMOUR CONTROL

So just how much is *Disclosure Day* in conversation with Spielberg’s previous takes on cosmic visitation? “What I find interesting is that he’s now told stories in this particular subject area four times, and each one has a very different tone,” says Koepp. “*Close Encounters* has little to do with *ET*, which has nothing to do with *War Of The Worlds*, and this is different from all of them. By changing genre every time,

T H E



WHO HAS THE POWER? HE-MAN, OF COURSE.  
DIRECTOR TRAVIS KNIGHT AND HIS CAST TAKE US TO  
ETERNIA AND BACK FOR **MASTERS OF THE UNIVERSE**

WORDS:  
ADAM TANSWELL

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PREPARE FOR MUSCLES, MAGIC AND masses of He-Man mayhem when *Masters Of The Universe* bursts on to the big screen in June. Nicholas Galitzine steps into the jacked-up lead role in a live-action story that promises to bring elements of the much-loved cartoon, comics and 1987 movie to audiences in a fresh and modern approach, which doesn't scrimp on nostalgia.

"I've been looking at Nick's half-naked body for the past year and it never gets old," quips director Travis Knight, speaking to *SFX* at an early footage screening event in Las Vegas. There are whoops, gasps and super-excited yelps from the handful of journalists shown select scenes, which includes a rather flesh-filled, crowd-rousing transformation. We're happy to confirm the film is crammed with kick-ass retro action and super-slick stunts, as well as a striking array of sublime characters. Mekaneck? Check. Trap Jaw? Yep. Idris Elba as Man-At-Arms? Abso-bloody-lutely.

It feels like Knight (who is CEO of stop-motion animation studio Laika and directed the live-action *Bumblebee*) is the perfect choice for director. His appreciation of Eternia is palpable. "When I was eight years old, *Masters Of The Universe* hit me like a thunderbolt," he tells us. "It was unlike anything I had ever seen. It was like a fever dream: swords, spaceships,



The gang entering the dreaded Castle Grayskull.

robots, laser guns, barbarians in furry knickers beating neon psychopaths to a pulp. It was unusual, it was deranged and it was sublime. For me, it was something that mattered."

There is a huge smile on Knight's face as he passionately speaks about the project: "That's the approach we brought to this movie. When you watch it, it is a bunch of muscle-bound dudes beating the shit out of each other, but it's also more than that. It's about compassion, it's about empathy and it's about hope. It's about being brave enough to care."

Knight confirms that he was never asked to dial down the cheeky tone of the movie, which showers the audience with nostalgia. "I was a child of the 1980s," he explains. "It was

**“ We tried to remain as faithful as possible to the things we love about the cartoon and the toys ”**

a weird time. It was not a decade that whispered, it was a decade that announced itself loudly over a drum machine, through a cloud of hairspray. Then there were the role models; the kind of men that a young boy like myself should one day aspire to become."

"These were real men," adds Knight, tongue-in-cheek. "Men who believed that if you expressed any emotional vulnerability, you

must immediately punch a fence post – but then there was He-Man, who was very different. I mean, he looked the part. He had biceps like Christmas hams. He had calves like Greek urns. He carried a sword the size of a canoe paddle and would regularly punch skeleton-faced warlocks into masonry, but he spoke about kindness, compassion, friendship and empathy. He was someone who cared."

The director's enthusiasm is hard to miss: "He-Man showed you to be strong and decent. For

PICTURES: GILES KEYTE © AMAZON MGM STUDIOS



Alison Brie as turncoat sorceress Evil-Lyn.



Jared Leto as iconic skull-faced villain Skeletor.

# HE-MAN OF THE MOMENT

Nicholas Galitzine on He-Man, movie magic and muscles



## ORKO OR BUST!

Is fan-favourite Orko in *Masters Of The Universe*? “You’ll have to wait and see, my friend,” Travis Knight tells *SFX*. “I know people love Orko and I have affection for the character, as I have affection for all the characters. Let’s see.”

me – a kid who was a little odd, with the social confidence of a damp crumpet – this was something that was unheard of. This synthesis of strength and sensitivity was seismic and special. It was like discovering you could own a tank *and* a diary. I was hooked.”

### SPOILER ALERT

When it comes to the story of the new movie, there’s a dastardly plot twist to the retro narrative. “If you watched the Filmation cartoons [from the ’80s], you know that Skeletor had some grand designs for power in every episode,” explains Knight. “He’s going to do some kind of scheme, he’s going to get his ass kicked and then he’s going to promise to return next week. Lather, rinse, repeat. We wondered, ‘What would happen if he actually won?’ That’s essentially how we start our movie. Skeletor’s plan finally works.”

Despite this departure from the cartoon, the creative team are hopeful that the film captures the spirit of the source material, as well as its look and key locations. “Eternia has so many incredible, eye-popping locations and I tried to get as many of them into the movie as possible,” says Knight. “Of course, we have Castle Grayskull, which was a thrill to bring to life. The city of Eternos is in there, as well as Subtania. Snake Mountain is a big one. We also

#### How much did you know about He-Man before this script arrived?

I grew up in the ’90s, so I didn’t grow up watching the cartoon – but *Masters Of The Universe* has always had an internet presence, whether it’s a meme or the iconic song. I wanted to absorb as much as I possibly could.

#### How would you describe the tone of the movie?

I love the fantasy sci-fi world. For this, I love how we’re able to skirt the line between absolute sincerity and being in on the joke. It’s tongue-in-cheek and maybe camp, but it’s also incredibly sincere.

#### How much did the He-Man costume evolve during production?

We tried a lot of variations. The boots were longer at one point. We shortened them. The chest plate was fully revealing at one point. It evolved. Even the sword took a lot of discussion.

#### How many swords were made for the movie?

There were about 12 iterations. They’d give it to me in stunt rehearsals

because I had to learn how to wield it as if it weighed nothing. At times, my forearms were burning up, so we’d have to shift the balance. They’d say, “Okay, we need to move the weight from the crossbridge to the pommel and see if that helps.” It was crazy.

#### What do you think of the character’s original costume design?

I kind of liked the fur underwear! Maybe that was an evolution we couldn’t get to, but there was never fur underwear to try on, unfortunately. Leather pants were an option for He-Man at one point and I told them, unequivocally, no. I demanded, “No leather pants!”

#### Did they ever consider covering you up a little more?

There were lots of discussions. The difficult thing we talked about was how much of the film I was going to be uncovered for, because it was pretty much half the film. Physically, that’s a difficult thing to achieve because it involves a lot of dehydration and stuff like that.

#### What did the physical training involve?

I came in for about five months of pre-production. I would’ve loved more time in the gym and learning stunts, but I made it work. I was in the gym for about three hours a day and I was in stunt training for about two hours every day. There would be three to four hours of make-up and costume every day, too. It was a life.

#### What was it like to tackle the stunt scenes?

I’ve got to shout him out: Liang Yang. He is the guy beating up Tom Cruise and Henry Cavill in the bathroom scene of *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*. Liang is the most badass person I know. He grew up in the Chinese circus. He is a genius with stunts.

#### How does it feel to be an action figure?

It’s incredible. There’s a He-Man Barbie! I mean, I’ve never seen hair more coiffed than my Barbie. I wish my hair had that weightlessness in real life. We can all imagine it, but it’s insane to be given something that looks like you.

have Skeletor's throne of bones, which absolutely looks like Skeletor's throne of bones."

Knight also tried to squeeze as many *Masters* characters as possible into the movie. "At some point, I felt like I was being a ridiculously irresponsible fanboy as opposed to a filmmaker, so I needed to pull back," he chuckles. "This universe is so rich and dense. It's got more than 40 years of history and mythology, so we've really just scratched the surface. I feel very fortunate that I was able to include some of my favourites, including Ram Man, Fisto and Mekaneck."

The costumes provided some interesting challenges for the team. Knight explains: "There was a lot of debate about He-Man. Can we really have a guy with furry hotpants and furry boots? We thought about it for a moment. At one point, there were leather trousers, where he looked like Jim Morrison. Ultimately, we ended with something that's evocative of the original costume, but we've brought it into the modern era. He's got the same silhouette, but a gladiator skirt instead of the furry knickers."

"Teela's costume is very different," says the director. "You see nods to the classic design, but we updated it. It didn't make sense that a warrior goddess would be running around in a one-piece swimsuit for the movie, so we made modifications. Overall, we tried to remain as faithful as possible to the things we love about the cartoon and the toys to begin with."

### BONES AND ALL

In terms of the movie's bony-faced foe, Skeletor, actor Jared Leto wore a sinewy muscle suit on set for the shoot. "It looks like flayed skin," says Knight. "For me, Skeletor was

## I HAVE THE POWER!

Preparing to recite the iconic incantation that transforms Prince Adam into He-Man was a nerve-racking experience for Nicholas Galitzine.

"This is one of those things you see on the schedule and think, 'Oh, shit,'" the actor chuckles. "I was very conflicted as to whether I wanted to rehearse it or just try to feel it on the day, which is what I landed on. It was really emotional. I mean, this is someone who's been put down their entire life. When he arrives on Earth, he's told by his teachers that he's crazy – but this incantation completely empowers him and vindicates his life of struggles. There are various iconic iterations of the incantation and you want to bring your own sentimentality to it. I wanted it to feel like it comes from my core and my gut."

"The sword took a lot of discussion," says Galitzine.

one of the most iconic villains of the '80s. Now, the origin of the Alan Oppenheimer voice [from the cartoon] was because they made this cartoon for kids, but Skeletor looked scary. They purposely came up with this silly, comical, nasal voice that took the edge off this frightening skull-faced character."

How does the new Skeletor compare? "Jared and I recognised that we wanted to honour all aspects of the character, including a distinctive voice and an interesting laugh," reveals Knight. "However, we did not want to engage in mimicry. Ultimately, the voice has menace and theatricality, which was always a part of Skeletor. He's scary and horrible, but he's also really, really entertaining to watch."

In creating the updated villain, Knight confirms the team also referenced the 1987 movie version of the character, played by Frank Langella. Other aspects of the '80s live-action film have also been brought into the 2026 project – including characters, such as Karg. "There are others, too," teases the director.

The bold big-screen action is filled with Easter eggs and nods to the past. "Every single frame of this movie has got something in it that was inspired or stolen directly from the cartoon or from the comics or the classic '87 film," admits Knight. "I think that's because so many people in the crew have an extraordinary affection for the material. They grew up with *Masters Of The Universe*. They love it. Now, if

you've never heard of *Masters* before, you can still sit in a cinema and be completely wrapped up in this journey – but if you are a fan, there's some extra special stuff for you."

### PRINCESS OF POWER

The internet is rife with speculation about whether or not She-Ra appears in the movie – and the director is keeping tight-lipped for now. "I can say very little about She-Ra," Knight tells *SFX*. "For me, She-Ra has always been a big part of the *Masters* world and a big part of Adam's story. In the fullness of time, if we're lucky to tell more stories in this universe, She-Ra will play a huge part. Whether or not she plays any part in this movie, I cannot say – but we definitely had many, many conversations about the character."

So what exactly does the future hold for the franchise? We ask Knight if sequels and spin-offs are in the pipeline: "Here's the reality of the situation... A company like Amazon isn't going to take on a property like this if they don't think there's potential to tell more stories within this world – and I agree with that point of view. *Masters* is a very dense universe. There's so much mythology, there are so many incredible, interesting characters and there are so many different types of stories you can tell within this space."

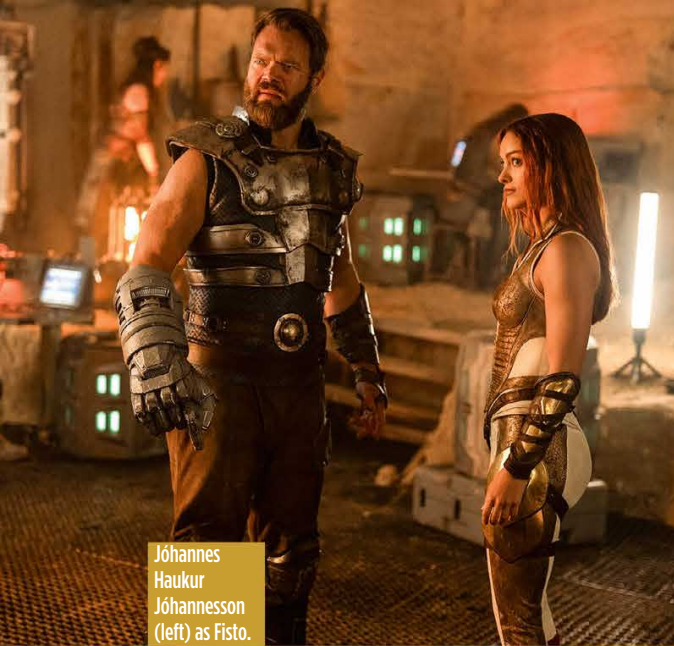
For more He-Man adventures to happen, it's up to audiences to make their voice heard at



Idris Elba features as Duncan, aka Man-At-Arms.

## SPILL THE TEELA

Camila Mendes on Teela, toys and transformations



Jóhannes Haukur Jóhannesson (left) as Fisto.

"For a cartoon, Skeletor looked scary," says Knight.



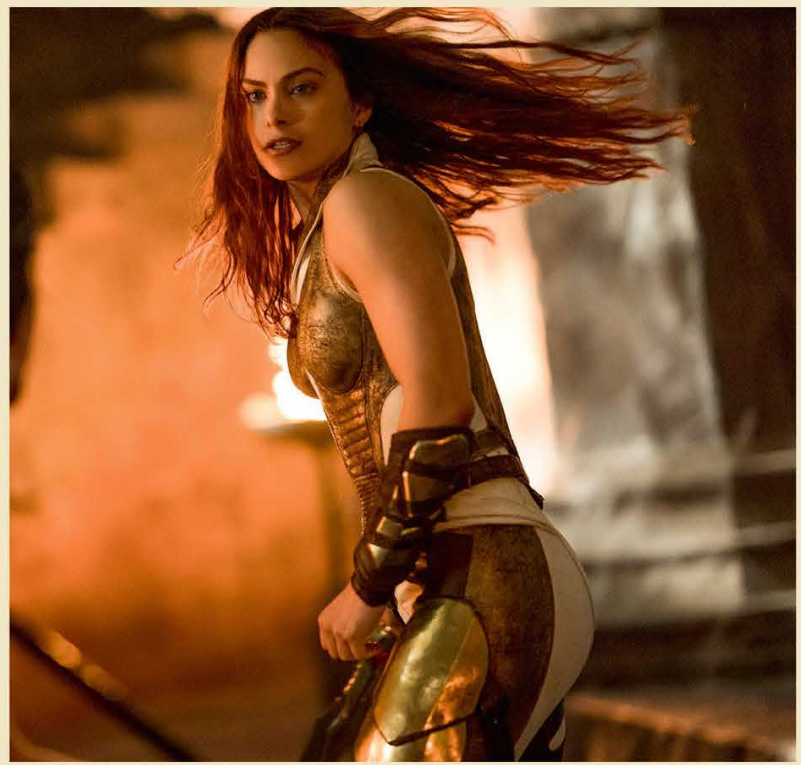
### MER-MAN ALIVE!

Keep your eyes peeled for Mer-Man in the movie. "I really wanted to get Mer-Man in the story, but I couldn't make it work," says Travis Knight. "However, my prosthetics guy did me a solid. If you look in the background, there's a dude who looks exactly like Mer-Man wandering around. For the keen-eyed fan, they'll see some cool stuff in the background."

the box office. In the meantime, *SFX* can confirm that a number of scenes from the live-action shoot ended up on the cutting room floor. More than three hours of footage was edited down to the film's final run-time.

"There's a lot of stuff that we had to excise to get the film into the shape it is now; a lot of stuff that I truly, deeply loved," says Knight. "There are giant scenes in the movie that aren't there any longer. I am very proud of the movie, but there are definitely things that I love that we had to cut. Hopefully, they will get to see the light of day at some point." Bring it on. ●

*Masters Of The Universe* is in cinemas from 3 June.



**What went through your mind when you first walked on to the set?**

I was amazed at the attention to detail and how much of it was practical. They built these beautiful sets. With these films, you always worry that you're going to have to do so much with your imagination because it's usually a green screen - but they really created a world and added so much texture to it. That made my job a lot easier.

**What was the most impressive set?**

To me, the most epic set was the outdoor set where

all the heroes of Grayskull are lined up. It's a set with all these big structures and it leads to Castle Grayskull. It's amazing. Actually, let me take that back... I think my favourite set was the enchanted forest.

**What can you tell us about the enchanted forest in the film?**

I felt like I was in a real forest on that set. I was like, "Wow, I would go hiking so much more if this is what I was hiking through." The enchanted forest was beautiful. The colours were so vibrant. I felt so at peace on that set. I felt like I was meditating in that forest.

**What was your biggest wow moment from the movie shoot?**

I feel like so many of my wow moments were with Nick; watching his transformation and seeing him take on such an iconic character. For Teela, I love my intro scene. I love how I'm introduced in the film. I think it's super strong.

**What do you think of Teela as a character?**

I love Teela. She's a leader. She's strong. She's great. Her story starts with Adam as a kid, which informs her journey throughout the movie. She's had to be independent from a very young age, which has created a tough exterior that has a lot to do with the themes of masculinity in the film and how she's affected by that.

**How does it feel to be an official Barbie doll?**

It's trippy. I mean, I played with Barbies as a kid, but never in a million years did I think that I'd be able to be a part of something that would call for me to have a Barbie. I think it's even cooler because this is a warrior Barbie. I love that combination. It's amazing.



Director Travis Knight on-set with He-Man and Teela.



# Golden



THE DUFFER BROTHERS' NEXT PRODUCTION IS *STRANGER THINGS* MEETS *COCOON*. SFX SPEAKS TO THE SHOWRUNNERS BEHIND *THE BOROUGHS*

WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD



# Years

**W**HEN JEFFREY ADDISS was a young boy, his parents were concerned. “They would talk about Jeff and his monsters in a worried tone,” he tells *SFX*, laughing at the memory. “But now they’re very excited for me.”

Addiss – alongside his creative partner and former *The Dark Crystal: Age Of Resistance* co-showrunner, Will Matthews – has turned

his childhood obsession into a TV show, *The Boroughs*, about an idyllic old folks community where margaritas are on tap, golf is daily, and an alien threat feasts on everyone’s brain fluid. Think a mixture of *Stepford, Pleasantville*, and *Don’t Worry Darling’s* Victory, just with the average age pushing 70 and creepy, spider-like monsters hiding in the shadows. “Something we said all the time was, ‘We would want to live in *The Boroughs*, if you →

could just solve the monster problem,” Addiss says.

The story begins when Alfred Molina’s curmudgeonly engineer, Sam, moves to The Boroughs following the death of his wife, Lilly (Jane Kaczmarek), whose dying wish was that they relocate. Sam, however, wants out of his new house contract – something easier said than done. Luckily, the neighbours are alright, with Bill Pullman’s Jack, Geena Davis’s Renee, Clarke Peters’s Art, Alfre Woodard’s Judy and Denis O’Hare’s Wally all within a stone’s throw distance. “There’s so much talent in this age group that is not being utilised fully,” Matthews says. “When we pitched, we said, ‘Think of the people you can get!’”

“Our actors talk about how they rarely get to be scared, emotional, laughing, excited and hunting monsters and having adventures all in one role,” Addiss adds. “They do here.”

### STAR QUALITY

Following a death from within their own ranks, The Boroughs’ residents form a Scooby gang and set about investigating what’s really going on behind their retirement village’s shiny veneer. If that sounds a bit like *Stranger Things* but with OAPs, that’s no coincidence: the creators of Hawkins, the Duffer Brothers, are producers on the series.

“The Duffer Brothers had just gotten their production deal and called us up because they liked *Dark Crystal*, and so they said, ‘We want to do your next show,’” Matthews says. “We said, ‘We absolutely know what that is, let us just get back to you...’ Then we turned to each other, and we were like, ‘This is our chance to do something big and original.’ We do a lot of [pre-existing] IP, and we love IP, but this was a rare chance to do an original, and we knew we would have the support from the Duffers to take a big swing.”

Retirement looks good on Bill Pullman’s Jack.



Jena Malone as concerned daughter Claire.



Alfred Molina (left) and Denis O’Hare get to work.



“We first pitched to the Duffers, and then to Netflix with the Duffers,” he continues. “We benefitted from *Stranger Things* having been a success with that age cast, because one of the things they had to struggle with selling it was it’s a show about kids, but it’s not just for kids. Because that worked for them, we didn’t have to push as hard on this being a show about older folks that’s not only for older folks. Netflix got that pretty quickly, because we really do think of the show as for everybody.”

“The people that I know who are older are full of life and doing amazing things, and that hasn’t really been represented on screen,” Addiss adds. “Yet, at the same time, older characters are often not listened to, not taken seriously, marginalised, which is often how kids feel. So there are real parallels between *The Boroughs* and *Stranger Things*, they’re just on entirely different points on the timeline.”

As well as having the Duffers on board, what helped sell Netflix on the idea was how simple the concept was. “Something we talked about was, ‘Why hasn’t anybody taken a new crack at something like *Cocoon*?’” says Addiss, referring to Ron Howard’s 1985 classic about aliens living among us. “The Duffers were really into that idea from the beginning. It seems crazy to us that nobody had done another *Cocoon*, and yet nobody else seems to think it’s crazy, which is very exciting.”

Addiss and Matthews also wanted to make a series that paid homage to the late ’90s and early ’00s blockbusters. “Like *Signs*,” Addiss explains. “They have a monster, they have an aggressive score for a film set in a house; we have a very aggressive classic score. It has that post-Amblin feel we were aiming towards. I mean, this is an adventure, and adventures have it all. Adventures are scary, adventures are



Carlos Miranda’s Paz snooping around.

heartfelt, adventures are emotional. *ET* hits all of the points; it’s just about kids.”

“That’s what we wanted for the characters,” Matthews says. “We wanted them to have all the facets of life. So they’re having affairs, they’re getting high around the campfire, they’re fighting monsters. They’re also complaining about how their knees hurt. They’re talking about who got what surgery.”

The characters were not written for specific actors, though the cast (star-studded is an understatement) impacted the script. “Alfre Woodard would leave us fantastic voice memos, and some of them literally ended up as dialogue in the show,” says Matthews. “Lines you wouldn’t expect came from her. I’m not going to say which ones, but they are in the show, they’re just too dirty to say in an interview.”

Meanwhile, Geena Davis’s music executive Renee was a reflection of the actor. “She’s so smart, her brain moves so fast,” Addiss says. “It’s very fun to write that into the character.” One problem they came up against, however, was accidentally recreating a moment from



## “There’s so much talent in this age group that was not being utilised fully”

“We try to make our villains never lie, which is a nice way to make them sympathetic,” Addiss says. “It’s a trick we learned on *Dark Crystal*. The Chamberlain never lies.”

Ah, *Dark Crystal*, cancelled after a single season despite ending on a cliffhanger. It was an experience that helped shape *The Boroughs* in a major way. “We knew we couldn’t save stuff for season two,” says Matthew. The duo, Addiss explains, pitched the Duffers a show with multiple seasons, which they have planned out, but, after their *Dark Crystal* experience, they decided against ending the first season with anything more than “a promise and a tease of where we want to go”.

“We’re giving you a full story arc here,” Addiss says. “We have places to go. We know the last shot of the last scene of the last episode of the last season. We could tell you what that is, but in season one, we want to take you on the full journey. That’s the biggest thing we learned from *Dark Crystal*, because, like our characters, you never really know what’s going to happen. So say everything you have to say, get it out on the field. You have other places to go, but don’t save it.”

Indeed, the season does not hold much back, especially when it comes to monsters.

“A version of the monster had existed in my brain for a while, and then working with Will, it got fuller and richer,” says Addiss. “The monster is death, which can be anywhere. It can lurk in the shadows. Our monster is one that you can’t quite understand what you’re seeing. Maybe it’s there, maybe it’s in the shadows, and you don’t quite realise until it moves that you’re looking at a leg. It’s sneaky, it’s quiet. It gets you when you aren’t expecting it.”

“We wanted the monster to be an equal character in that it also had an arc,” says Matthews. “It also has a perspective, and it relates to the theme and the predicaments of the main characters. The creature is older. Its joints hurt. One of the original ideas was tentacles, and then our creature designer was like, ‘No, we want fingers. You want knuckles that crack. You want the creature to be what the characters are afraid of.’ So here’s a way to look at age in a way that’s scary.”

“Because I’m me and I love monsters, we know how it feeds, how it sleeps,” says Addiss. “We know everything about the monster, and revealing that will be part of the fun over the seasons, knock on wood.”

*The Boroughs* is on Netflix from 21 May.



one of her best-known roles, Thelma, of *Thelma & Louise*.

“A downside of having iconic stars is that you don’t realise how much their movies are part of your subconscious,” says Matthews. “We were working on a car crash sequence, and we kept saying to each other that we can’t subconsciously recreate the moment from *Thelma & Louise*. But we did it. You end up doing it, and you don’t realise you’re doing it. We had Geena sneak into a room and pull a weapon on the monster. We originally had her pull a baseball bat. Then it was like, ‘Wait a minute. We can’t have you take a baseball bat [a nod to *A League Of Their Own*].’ She ended up with a golf club.”

For such a brilliant cast, you need an equally excellent soundtrack, and *The Boroughs* has many well-placed needle drops. “If there’s a great song called ‘Golden Years’, let’s just do it,” Addiss says, referring to David Bowie’s ‘70s single. “Bruce Springsteen’s ‘Thunder Road’ was something really important to us, because it just felt like the right song for this show.”

“When you’ve got the people who made a lot

of the magic happen on *Stranger Things*, the publishers want their next ‘Running Up That Hill!’,” laughs Matthews.

### THE YOUNG ONES

There are, it should be noted, a few younger faces among the cast members, too. Jena Malone plays Sam’s daughter, who wants the best for her father, but is also struggling with the death of her mother. Then there are *The Boroughs*’ founders, played by Seth Numrich and Alice Kremelberg. You probably won’t be surprised to learn that their residents’ best interests are not their top priority...

“We knew pretty early on that the young guy who’s in charge of the place, he’s suspicious, you’re going to think he might be a bad guy,” Matthews says. “We didn’t want to hide that as much as fill it out. So how is he a bad guy? He does genuinely care for these people, and he does genuinely want them to have a good experience, just maybe it’s a few years shorter than the experience they would otherwise have in order to serve his own needs. But he’s not evil for evil’s sake.”

# BRINGING SCARY

MARLON WAYANS  
IS RECLAIMING THE  
**SCARY MOVIE**  
FRANCHISE THAT  
HE CREATED FOR A  
MODERN AUDIENCE  
- BUT WILL THEY  
ACCEPT IT?



WORDS:  
**HANNA FLINT**



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# RY BACK



# M

Y FATHER, ON HIS LAST DAY IN hospital, made me promise him that we'll do this movie," says Marlon Wayans, actor, writer, producer and co-creator of the *Scary Movie* franchise.

That deathbed conversation with Howell Wayans took place in March 2023, 22 years after the release of *Scary*

*Movie 2*, the last film in the franchise in which Wayans and his brothers, Keenan Ivory and Shawn, were involved, and 17 years after the release of *Little Man*, the final movie the siblings worked on as a team. "I was like, I don't know if you know this Pop, but your sons are crazy, how do you expect us to do that?"

But Wayans held his father's hand, looked into his eyes, kissed him on his forehead and made a vow. "My brothers and I have been away from doing movies together for a long time, but I kept my promise," Wayans says. "I made it happen in honour of my dad – and because the world needs a big-ass laugh."

## WORLD VIEW

In a cinematic era defined by remakes, reboots and legacy sequels, it seemed inevitable that *Scary Movie* was due for a comeback, especially with a studio that had already garnered success by reviving another cult parody franchise. Paramount's *The Naked Gun* earned over double its budget at the global box office, proving a renewed appetite for the silly slapstick humour that previously defined a sub-section of comedy.

Wayans aimed to tap back into that nostalgia to entertain both old fans and new audiences. "I just want everybody to go to the theatre and laugh like we did," he says. "I think this generation needs it. I think their parents need it; to laugh again with our mom, our dad, our teenage kids, and have a good time."

*Scary Movie* pushed the comedic boat further than its parody forebearers. Mashing up the plots of teen slashers *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, while poking fun at many others, the Wayans brothers drenched their film in violently sexual, crude and provocative humour, and no demographic was safe from a skewering.

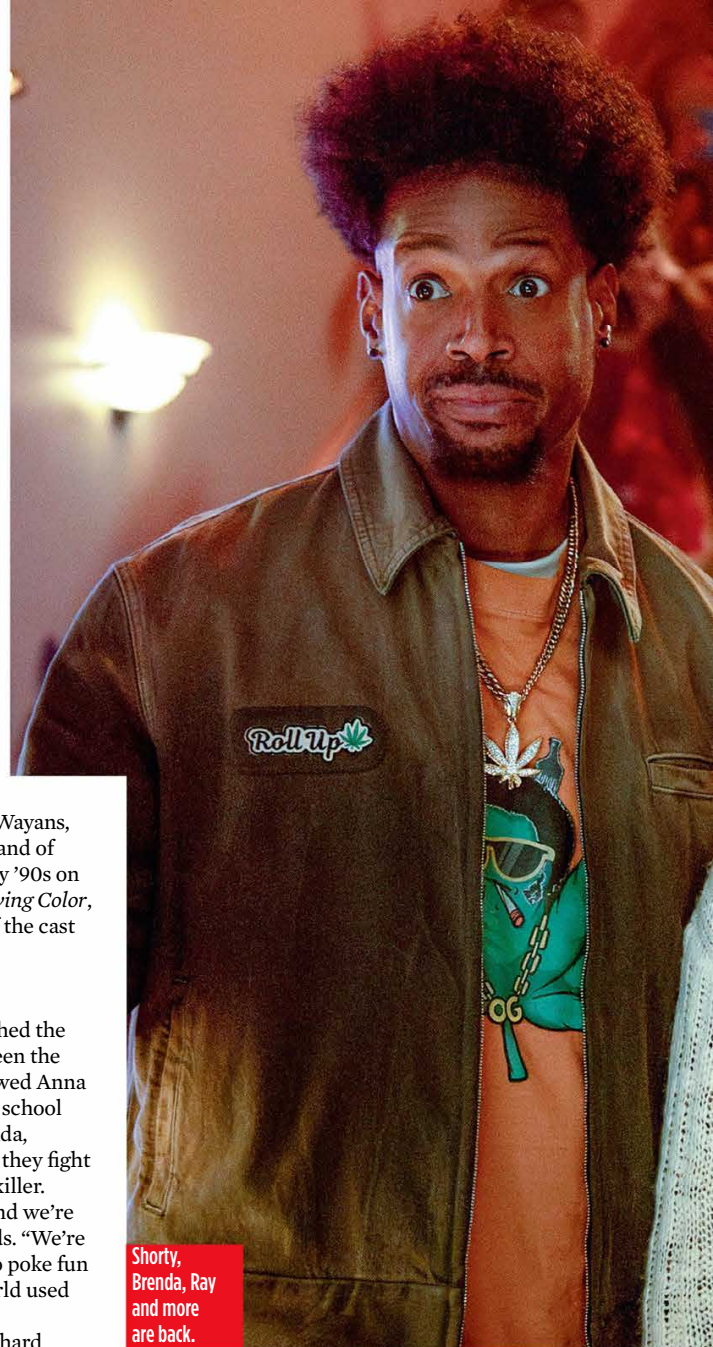
"This is the way my brothers and I saw the world, of our experience of how we grew up in

the projects of New York City," says Wayans, who had previously nurtured this brand of humour with his brothers in the early '90s on the revolutionary sketch series *In Living Color*, conceived by Keenan, where most of the cast were African-American.

## OFFENCE TAKEN

The original *Scary Movie*'s jokes pushed the boundaries of taste, oscillating between the subtle and the outrageous, as it followed Anna Faris's Cindy Campbell and her high school friends, including Regina Hall's Brenda, Marlon's Shorty and Shawn's Ray, as they fight for their lives against the Ghostface killer. "There are casualties to every war, and we're equal-opportunity offenders," he adds. "We're not afraid to poke fun at ourselves, to poke fun at others, because that's how the world used to be."

Some critics felt that it leaned too hard into vulgarity, with a smorgasbord of sexist, homophobic, ableist and transphobic humour to digest alongside a more innocuous ribbing of the ridiculous slasher movie tropes and stereotypes of the day. It even offended a few of the filmmakers behind some of the films it lampooned.



Shorty, Brenda, Ray and more are back.

"I don't think they understood what we were doing, so they were more protective then, you know, 'How dare they!'" Wayans recalls. "But it only made their property [hit] that much harder."

It certainly didn't bother Dimension Films, the genre label of Miramax set up by Bob Weinstein, who greenlit the film before a script had finished being penned. Dimension produced and distributed the original *Scream* tetralogy, too. "Who better to spoof [the *Scream* franchise] than us?" Weinstein said in 2017. "*Scream* still stood on its own, because *Scream* was great. We had the guts to do it."

That risk paid off. *Scary Movie* found its audience, earning over \$278 million at the global box office against a \$19 million production budget, making it one of the most successful R-rated horror-comedy films at the time.

It also proved a massive step for Black representation, becoming the highest-grossing movie directed by an African-American until



Terrifier's Damien Leone gave his approval.



“We’re not afraid to poke fun at ourselves and others... that’s how the world used to be”

the release of 2005’s *Fantastic Four*, directed by Tim Story.

With its diverse cast, it broke the mould of white-centric casts, not just in the horror genre, but in cinema in general. And despite the criticism, *Scary Movie* earned a lot of love from the queer community, especially through Regina Hall’s Brenda, a beloved character whose popularity has only increased thanks to modern meme culture. “We’ve always had love from the LGBTQ [community] from *Scary Movie* to *White Chicks*, and when we did *In Living Color*,” says Wayans. “We’re hopefully making a joke that’s so powerful that the people that we’re sending up laugh the loudest.”

### SCARY STORY

A sequel was greenlit immediately after *Scary Movie*’s release, and the Wayans were given a \$45 million budget to play with. *Scary Movie 2* hit theatres less than a year later in 2001.

Most of the cast returned for the ride, but the rushed production gave little time for developing the script, resulting in an unfocused satire of the original that overcompensated with gross-out humour. Still, it made a respectable \$141 million at the box office, and soon a third film was ordered – but it was the end of the road for the Wayans brothers.

Wayans has spoken of the “crappy deal” Bob Weinstein made with them on the first film, which admittedly improved on the second, but after pitching the third film concept, the offer was once again “outrageously” low. Then they were hit with a gut punch: Weinstein had unceremoniously replaced them with director David Zucker of *Airplane!* and *The Naked Gun* fame, and Zucker’s long-time collaborator, screenwriter Pat Proft. Their franchise had →

## ROLL CALL!

What would *Scary Movie* be without the horror films it parodies? Here are a few of the new jump scares to expect



### M3GAN

The murderous AI doll’s sassy dance moves made her a horror icon, and it looks like she’s set to throw some serious shapes.

### MA

Judging by Regina King’s hairdo, Brenda has matured into Octavia Spencer’s eponymous mama-terroriser of teens. Wig! As they say.



### GET OUT

Cup of tea, Shorty? The Sunken Place from Jordan Peele’s 2017 social horror gets a rude re-awakening.

### SMILE

Jon Abrahams’s Bobby turns his frown pointing down with a creepy nod to the 2022 supernatural psychological horror.



### THE SUBSTANCE

Coralie Fargeat’s body horror gets a send-up with what looks like Gail Hailstorm (Cheri Oteri) getting a painful injection of the yellow stuff.

### LONGLEGS

Osgood Perkins’s mystery horror gets the Wayans treatment with Nicolas Cage’s satanic serial killer sent up by *Scary Movie 2*’s Chris Elliott, who is back as Hanson.

## DEATH BECOMES THEM

You might be thinking, “Wait, didn’t they die?” But in the *Scary Movie* franchise, everyone is fair game, and anyone can be resurrected. Just look who came back from the grave...

### BRENDA

Regina King’s audacious BFF might have been stabbed to near-death by angry cinemagoers, but she met her end in *Scary Movie 3* after watching a Ring-inspired cursed videotape. There was even a funeral! But death could never keep Brenda down, as she was back in *Scary Movie 4*.

### GREG

Lochlyn Munro’s jock had his throat slit by Ghostface while watching his girlfriend, Buffy, take part in a beauty pageant. But it clearly didn’t take, as he’s now walking the beat as a local cop.

### BOBBY

Cindy’s boyfriend, played by Jon Abrahams, was not only stabbed by his secret lover, Ray, but also stabbed again by the Ghostface killer, leading to his demise. Now he’s back with a massive smile on his face.

### RAY

The not-so-closeted cat with nine lives, played by Shawn Wayans, not only takes a dick through his ear via a glory hole, but gets stabbed by Ghostface in the back and the mouth. He reappeared in *Scary Movie 2* and survived that hell house, cementing his place in the new film – it certainly helps your odds when you co-created the franchise!

### HANSON

The creepy butler, who loved to mix mashed potatoes with his tiny “strong” hand, was put through the wringer in *Scary Movie 2*. After being explosively possessed by a ghost, he’s later run down by Shorty Meeks, but never underestimate a man with a disability, because he’s back in eccentric action.



Regina Hall’s presence guaranteed Faris’s return.

been ripped from them and placed in the hands of white filmmakers.

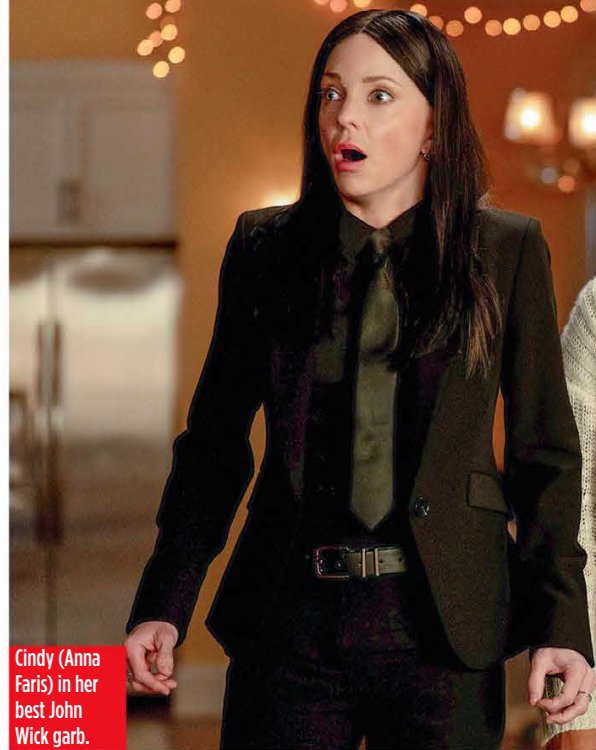
It was a tough pill to swallow, but “not the first time that something like this has happened”, says Wayans. The family also walked away from *In Living Color*, the series Keenan created, after its fourth season because of a financial dispute with Fox, its broadcaster. Without the Wayans, the show suffered creatively, leading to a declining viewership and its cancellation two seasons later. The same happened for the *Scary Movie* franchise, which never managed to recapture the magic of the original in its three later instalments without the Wayans.

“You can take Frankenstein’s Monster, but it’s only a matter of time before he starts to get out of control, and you’re not going to know what to do with it, because you didn’t create it,” says Wayans. “You know, who knows what to do with Frankenstein’s Monster? Dr Frankenstein. The humour that we have, you can’t replicate. You can take a product, which is *Scary Movie*, but you can’t steal the formulas of our brand, you can’t copy it, and that’s because there’s no way you can see the world like we see it.”

In the years since, Wayans has discussed the betrayal, calling Bob Weinstein “evil” in a 2024 interview, but he has nothing but love for David Zucker. “Zucker is a genius,” says Wayans. “We’ve always been fans of the Zuckers, *Airplane!* raised us.” Now that the brothers have reclaimed the franchise, he’s feeling more reflective: “My dad raised us with the Bible, and vengeance is God’s, not ours. I don’t need to complain. It’s not about any of the malfeelings about the Weinsteins or anything like that. This is about bringing laughter back to the movie theatres, and that’s got to come from goodness.”

### SCOOBY GANG

So how did they get the band back together for a new outing? A simple phone call. In 2024, the Wayans reached out to Faris and Hall to pitch them the movie. Faris had long said she would return as Cindy if Hall came back as Brenda, and luckily for both her and the Wayans, she agreed. “It was like, ‘You guys are doing it? I’m in!’” Wayans recalls, noting that both actors signed on without even seeing a script first. “Then I sent it to them, and they were like, ‘Oh my god, I’m definitely in, this is so funny.’”



Cindy (Anna Faris) in her best John Wick garb.



Gail Hailstorm and Special Officer Doofy, reunited.

The Wayans had a lot more time to develop the screenplay before heading into production in 2025, writing “600 to 800 pages” of story, enough for “three different movies”, before whittling it down to one. “You kill your babies all the time, you write the stuff you love, and then if it doesn’t fit, you’re like, damn,” says Wayans. “You can’t get married to anything. Then after you make a movie, you test it, and things that you thought were going to be hilarious the audience doesn’t like, so you write new stuff. It’s the process; the more jokes you do, the more you can get rid of, because you want the best quality ones in there.”

When it comes to the question of which horror movies to spoof, Wayans said the



One filmmaker in particular, Damien Leone, the creator of the *Terrifier* franchise, was especially pleased to have his antagonist Art the Clown sent up in the new film. “He came down to the set and was really stoked,” he says. “They’re fans of comedy the same way we’re fans of horror, and they know we’re not doing it to be malicious.”

The shoot proved to be an exercise in healing. The director this time is Wayans’s *A Haunted House* and *Naked* collaborator Michael Tiddes, and Faris and Hall were joined by original cast members Jon Abrahams, Cheri Oteri and David Sheridan, who respectively play Bobby, Gail Hailstorm and Doofy Gilmore.

“We missed doing this,” says Wayans. “It just felt good all of us being on a set together, laughing and hugging and crying. It was wonderful. I’m so proud of Anna and Regina and what they’ve done. All of us came from *Scary Movie*, and it was our springboard.”

### GETTING CANCELLED

But not everyone reenlisted. Shannon Elizabeth, who played Buffy Gilmore in *Scary Movie*, recently lamented not being asked to return. Wayans put it down to there not being room in the script for everyone, as they balanced bringing back old characters and introducing new ones, some of which are played by family members Damon Wayans Jr, Gregg Wayans and Kim Wayans.

“It’s about what fits,” he explains. “You can only do so much; it’s hard.” He remembers being cast as Robin by Tim Burton in *Batman Returns*, signing a contract and being fitted for a costume, but ultimately being cut from the script. “I understand now, as a producer and a filmmaker, why that may have happened, why those choices got that way, so it’s nothing personal.”

It must have been gratifying to experience the fanfare after the first trailer was released online. An outpouring of affection came from fans and horror filmmakers alike as they watched Cindy, Brenda, Shorty and Ray reunite. Wayans felt especially happy to see an effusive reaction when it was played ahead of *Scream 7* showings a few days earlier: “People were so happy to see that trailer on screen because it’s a direct parody – it showed the two can coexist.”

But can a new *Scary Movie* revive a “no-holds-barred” attitude at a time when sensibilities have shifted for what now

“We’re not trying to make people feel bad. Sometimes you hit, sometimes you miss”

constitutes acceptable forms of comedy? The official *Scary Movie* synopsis claims it can. “Nothing is sacred. No trope survives. Every line gets crossed”, it states. “The Wayans are back to cancel the Cancel Culture.” What does that actually mean?

“To cancel the cancel culture is to cancel those that feel that you can’t say anything anymore without getting into trouble,” explains Wayans. “I know that audiences are not as sensitive as what is portrayed on social media.”

He blames “bots from other countries and algorithms” that are trying to “take away our freedom of speech and keep us divided” for the changing attitudes towards comedy.

That might be the case in some corners of the internet, but an evolution in taste towards something that is less about punching down can’t simply be put down to bad-faith digital actors. Take the backlash over the trailer’s joke about pronouns, which some described as “boring” and “transphobic”. For Wayans, who has publicly advocated for his trans son Kai, the purpose has never been to denigrate any group but handle spicier jokes “with kid gloves”.

“I think a lot of comedians and filmmakers want to offend, but it’s not about offending; it’s about making a joke that people can laugh at collectively,” he says. “We’re not trying to make people feel bad. Sometimes you hit, sometimes you miss, sometimes people are just sensitive.”

The Wayans will soon discover just how well modern audiences get on with their cult brand of humour when *Scary Movie* hits screens this June. If it does as well as the original, he already has future instalments “mapped out” in his head. “I don’t want to jump the gun, but we know where to go with the franchise,” he says.

With the horror space constantly expanding and diversifying, there’s no end to the inspiration for *Scary Movies* to come, and Wayans hopes the franchise can help people weather the storm of life. “The thing that gets you through is when you can laugh at the dark stuff,” he says. “We have to keep that hope alive – keep that laughter alive.” ●

*Scary Movie* is in cinemas from 5 June.

selection had to “feel organic” and there’s “no formula where it needs to be two parts horror, one part pop culture”. Fortunately for the brothers, they could pick up where they left off with the *Scream* franchise thanks to its recent run of legacy sequels. And with an influx of Black-led and Black-created horror properties, they were able to reference the likes of *Ma*, led by Octavia Spencer, and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*.

Wayans recently worked on the Peele-produced supernatural horror *Him*, and said the filmmaker asked if they were going to riff on one of his movies. “I think now people have come to know our humour, and the *Scary Movie* brand, that to them it’s a badge of honour for us to parody them,” he says.

FROM



Smiley's body and organs for his "autopsy" scene.

Dale's grisly demise was a practical effect.



"Scars and burns, sir? Browse our selection..."



The generic "pull-over monster mask".

# FROM

## BEHIND-THE-SCENES

STEP ON TO THE SUPER-SINISTER SET OF *FROM* WITH SFX TO UNCOVER SOME BIG, BOLD AND UBER-BLOODY BEHIND-THE-SCENES SECRETS

WORDS: ADAM TANSWELL

**S**FX IS STANDING ON the Canadian set of *From* for the fourth season of the acclaimed horror show. We've been invited to head behind the camera to discover how the blood-soaked series is brought to the small screen – complete with exclusive access to the sets, the creative team and the people behind the creepiest creatures on TV. It's our mammoth guide to the monster MGM+ drama.

Our first stop: Prosthetics. A trio of white trailers stand in a dusty parking lot close to some high-security entry gates in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Inside two of the trailers, the show's hair and make-up teams busily work away with various cast members. The prosthetics crew has their on-set

base in the third. Patrick Baxter warmly welcomes us into his gory (and yet gleamingly clean) makeshift office, where a macabre mannequin sits on a sofa. Its eyes have been creepily replaced with large buttons and its mouth has been sewn shut with what looks like thin strands of leather. It's gruesome and chilling, but super cool to see. "That's a spoiler," we're told – although perhaps not when you read this.

On the counter tops there are piles of pizza boxes filled with prosthetic scars, slashes and burns. "It takes up to 75 minutes to apply a small burns prosthetic to an actor," Baxter cheerily tells us. "I put it on them, clean it up and then paint it – but the bigger burns prosthetics take much longer, obviously."



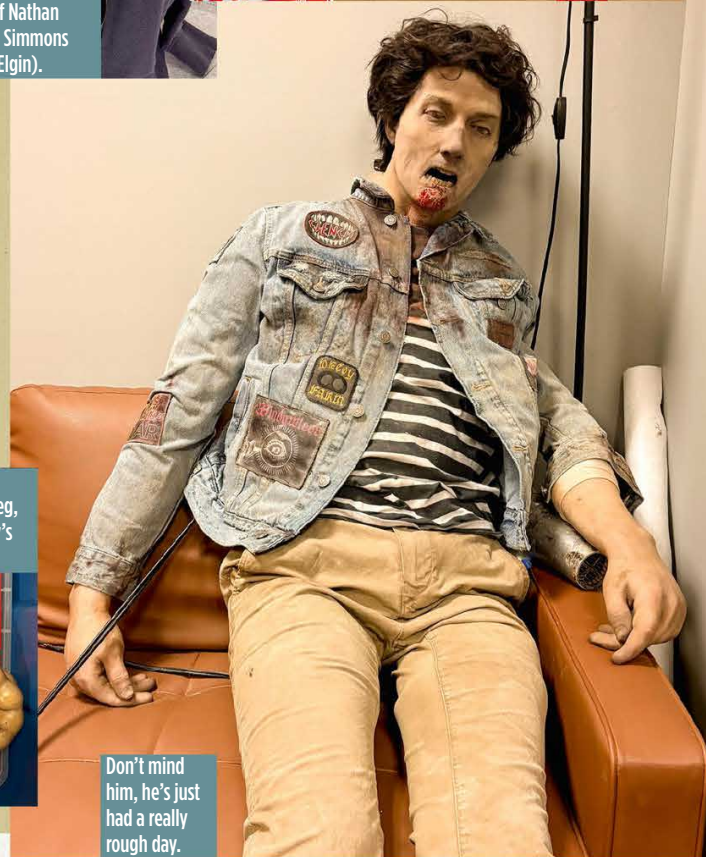
The remains of Tian-Chen – or at least, a model of her.



A puppet of Nathan D Simmons (Elgin).



Never has a box been more accurately labelled.



Don't mind him, he's just had a really rough day.



"Or perhaps sir would prefer a death mask?"



Not meat and two veg, but Smiley's organs.

There are morbid masks of various creature characters dotted around the small space. "This is a generic, stunt performer, pull-over monster mask, but we don't usually use it," reveals Baxter, showing us a sinister Smiley headpiece. "We usually use prosthetics, which means we'll put a bald cap on the actor, followed by another bald cap and another face – and then we'll add the teeth individually. The process takes two of us around two and a half hours to apply."

Next to the mask, *SFX* spots a bloodied, one-eyed puppet of a character called Elgin (Nathan D Simmons). If you've seen season three, you'll know that Elgin loses

an eye during a brutal point in the story. "We shot that scene in two ways," explains Baxter. "We shot it with an eyeball dangling out of its socket and then we shot it without the eyeball. I think they elected to go without the eyeball in the end, but the eyeball hanging out was my personal favourite."

An unassuming industrial park located in a nearby neighbourhood is home to a larger and more permanent prosthetics department, as well as production meeting rooms, office space and various interior sets from the show. When *SFX* walks into the room to meet Baxter on day two of our trip, there's a cavalcade of creepy props and artifacts scattered around the space – including blood-splattered

cadavers, skeletal remains, slashed-up animals and a box filled with Smiley's body organs.

At the back of the room, we spy a section of the show's motel swimming pool wall. Embedded within the concrete façade is the face, hand and foot of the character of Dale, whose grisly ending is highlighted here.

"We can control his lips and fingertips," says Baxter. We pick up the cable attached to see if it's still working. "People have asked if that scene was digitally created, but the only digital element was a blink of the eye. It's an incredible likeness of the actor, Cliff Saunders."

Elsewhere, a huge rack holds a stack of coffin-sized boxes on its shelves. These cardboard containers store intricately

designed prosthetic pieces, such as the realistic-looking corpse of Tian-Chen Liu and the gory, twisted carcass of Smiley. "This Smiley body has a magnetic chest piece," reveals Baxter. "The skin flops over the top for an autopsy sequence in the show, so we can 'fake' cut it, flip it open and take the chest bone plate out to see whatever else is in there."

The Tian-Chen body is eye-poppingly life-like. "We did a full head cast of Elizabeth Moy, who plays Tian-Chen. I think we also did a cast of her hand, but the shop has a stock mould of other bodies, so they didn't have to put Elizabeth through the whole body process. They used a generic body mould and attached the hands and the head to that – and then it was all shredded up." →

Special effects supremo Patrick Baxter and friend.





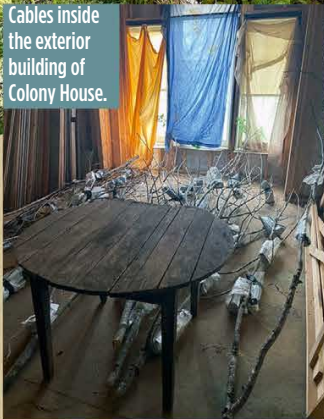
The church, complete with real overgrowth.



Locations are precisely modelled to scale.



Cables inside the exterior building of Colony House.



One of the interior sets on Stage One. Thanks, 3M.



What remains of the Matthews' former house.

Later in the day, production designer Matt Likely takes *SFX* on a tour of *From* town. The impressive outdoor set has been built on private land in Beaver Bank, Nova Scotia. The main road meanders away from the show's stone church through to the huge barn – past the iconic diner, playground, motel pool, petrol station and various residential houses. There's a hole in the corner of the post office where a vehicle has crashed into the building. The whole area is surrounded by woods.

"It took 13 weeks to build this town," reveals Likely. "We had time before that to design the buildings and get everything approved, but the actual building time was basically 13 weeks. A team of up to 100 carpenters and painters worked on it."

"I feel like the town is getting better with age," he adds. "It's been four years since we first built it and things are growing up around it now. Some of the fake ageing-up that we did at the start of the project has gone away and the real ageing has taken over."

When you walk around *From* town, it feels incredibly authentic. You can open the doors to the homes and peek inside to see the living rooms and kitchens. You can take a seat in the diner and look through the songs playing on the jukebox. You can inspect maps and drawings on the walls of various buildings, as well as wander around the church. The painstaking attention to detail is remarkable.

"One of our location scouts knew about this place," explains



A scale model of the town, used to block out scenes.

To the lighthouse... but it's teeny tiny in reality.

STOCK ART: DARIO SABLAK, REVELL STOCKART/GETTY.

One of the many buildings created from scratch.



The diner: come on in and see what music you get...



Colony House – or at least, the exterior of it.



Memorials to poor old Bing-Chen and Tian-Chen.



The pool into which Dale was transported.

Likely. “There used to be a community here, which is why the roads and the telephone poles were here when we started, but none of the structures were present. We mapped out the town in a way that worked for the story based on the first two scripts – and then we built it all from scratch.”

“The different buildings in town come from different eras, so you can maybe take away that buildings have been added along the way,” he continues. “You might see a chair from the school bus in the church.”

“It’s been fun to justify what could’ve been brought into town along the way and what was there when the town was created – and how things have moved around.”

In the distance, Colony House sits on top of a hill – but it’s only the shell of the building. This striking exterior set is a short drive away from the main town, but the interior has been built inside a warehouse off-site.

It’s housed on Stage One of the production’s base in nearby Dartmouth, alongside other interior sets from the show.

If you’re into Easter eggs, Likely admits there’s a lot to uncover in *From*. “The fans are super passionate about the show, but there are big things and small things that they haven’t figured

out yet. There are little Easter eggs that don’t mean a lot in the grand scheme of things, but are fun to include. There are bigger ones, too. If we have a new room in Colony House and we’re trying to figure out what should go on the walls, we might subtly reference things from that season. It’s fun to work on stuff like that.”

Where should eagle-eyed fans be looking for these undiscovered treats? “There’s stuff in Victor’s room that can still be found,” he teases. “Elsewhere, there might be things that seem out of context, but will make total sense as we move forward. See what you can find.” Good luck, *From* fans. 🍀

*From* is on MGM+ in the US and Sky/NOW in the UK.



Another scale model used for planning scenes.



A roll call of the town’s fallen... up till now, that is.





# WESTWORLD

WHEN MICHAEL CRICHTON began developing *Westworld* in the early '70s, he soon realised its onscreen potential. The bestselling author, already known for novels such as *The Andromeda Strain*, recognised that the premise was tailor-made for cinema: a lavish futuristic resort where wealthy tourists could live out their fantasies inside immersive historical worlds populated by lifelike androids. Guests could duel gunslingers, seduce saloon girls, or swagger through ancient Rome without fear of consequences. The robots serving them were designed to obey strict programming and could never harm a human being. Until, of course, they could.

MORE THAN 50 YEARS AFTER ITS RELEASE, **WESTWORLD** REMAINS A CHILLING WARNING ABOUT HUMANITY'S FAITH IN TECHNOLOGY. WE DISCUSS ITS LEGACY WITH STAR RICHARD BENJAMIN

Released in 1973, *Westworld* starred Richard Benjamin and James Brolin as urban professionals seeking escapist thrills at the Delos resort. For Benjamin, the appeal of the role mirrored his own passions. "I was a kid growing up in New York City, loving westerns and science fiction," he tells *SFX*. "But never in my wildest dreams did I think, how am I going to be in a western? Then my agent sent me this script, and I thought, 'Holy smokes!' The two things I thought would never happen were suddenly in one movie. So I just jumped at it."

## FUTUREWORLD

Benjamin plays the somewhat timid Peter Martin, who accompanies his more adventurous friend John Blane (Brolin) to Delos. The resort offers several themed →

## “Making Westworld was more than fun; it was every boy’s fantasy come true”

environments, including Roman World and Medieval World, but the pair opt for the dusty frontier setting of Western World. There they encounter saloons, outlaws and gunfighters, all convincingly embodied by android hosts designed to behave like characters from classic Hollywood westerns. “Just like my character in the film, I got to do all the things that I dreamed of as a boy: shoot guns, draw against a gunslinger, ride horses. The whole thing was more than fun; it was every boy’s fantasy come true,” he says.

Crichton deliberately built the film around those familiar cinematic myths. Westerns had shaped audiences’ understanding of the American frontier for decades; *Westworld* imagined a theme park where those movie fantasies could be physically inhabited. However, the story quickly twists that escapist dream into something far darker when a black-clad Gunslinger played by Yul Brynner decides to retaliate. Crichton intentionally modelled the character on Brynner’s iconic role in *The Magnificent Seven*, even dressing him in the same black outfit. Initially, the character functions as a harmless attraction: a robotic adversary programmed to lose gunfights against paying guests. Martin easily defeats him in several staged showdowns. But when mysterious malfunctions begin spreading through the park, the Gunslinger stops losing and becomes a terrifying adversary. For Benjamin, sharing the screen with Brynner was both daunting and rewarding. The legendary actor quickly proved himself an enthusiastic mentor.

“He took me on the backlot one day when neither one of us were called,” continues Benjamin. “He said, ‘If you watch westerns, even the biggest stars blink when the guns go off.’ That kind of ruined watching westerns for the rest of my life, because now that’s all I look for! He said, ‘I’m going to condition you, so you don’t blink when you fire these weapons.’ And he did!”

The actor’s dedication to filmmaking also left a lasting impression. “One day, he showed up on set when he wasn’t even scheduled to shoot. The assistant director said, ‘Mr Brynner, did someone call you? You’re not working today.’ And he said, ‘No, nobody called



Yul Brynner’s Gunslinger gets inside his own head.



Linda Gaye Scott as robot saloon worker Arlette.

Martin (right) draws first against the Gunslinger.

me. I just can’t think of a better place to be!’ He loved being on a movie set.”

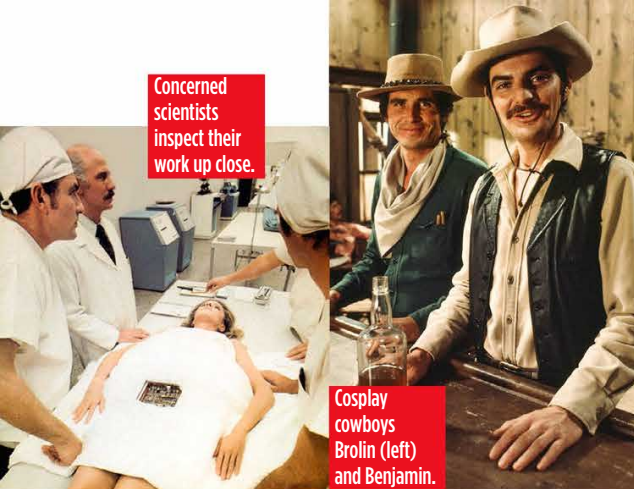
While Martin and Blane enjoy their simulated western adventure, small problems begin to appear throughout Delos. At first, the glitches seem trivial: a robotic rattlesnake unexpectedly bites Blane, while elsewhere a female android refuses the advances of a visitor. Soon, the incidents grow more serious. In Medieval World, a swordfight between a tourist and a robotic knight turns deadly. Behind the scenes, technicians struggle to understand why the androids’ behaviour is changing.

Crichton famously described the problem as spreading like an infectious disease among the machines. In a twist that feels particularly prescient today, the park’s engineers eventually reveal that many of the systems controlling the robots were themselves designed by computers, making the malfunction difficult to trace. “It was kind of innocent when we made it. But Michael

was always so far ahead of everything,” continues Benjamin. “There’s this idea that nothing can go wrong with the machines, and then suddenly it’s ‘don’t trust the machines.’ Well, look where we are now.”

Although *Westworld* marked Crichton’s directorial debut, Benjamin remembers him as a remarkably confident and prepared filmmaker. “Sometimes, you just know you’re in the room with the smartest person,” he says. “And you think you’re smart because you’re with him. He knew exactly what he wanted. We shot quickly, and it was a nice set where everybody got along. He was just a down-to-earth, terrific guy who happened to be incredibly smart.”

The film’s final act abandons the playful tone of its opening scenes and descends into stark science fiction horror, as the robots become hauntingly sentient and the Gunslinger hunts Martin across the deserted park. The relentless pursuit, shot partly from the robot’s pixelated point-of-view, has often been cited as a precursor to *The Terminator*, with Arnold Schwarzenegger later acknowledging Brynner’s influence on his own performance. But, not unlike the T-800, it’s the Gunslinger’s eerie silence that enhances his menace.



Concerned scientists inspect their work up close.

Cosplay cowboys Brolin (left) and Benjamin.



A scrap kicks off in the halls of Medieval World.

Brynner's minimal dialogue helped make the character even more intimidating. "He once told me that in *The Magnificent Seven*, he gave a lot of his dialogue away to the other actors," Benjamin reveals. "His feeling was that if he said less, what he did say became more powerful."

Benjamin also recalls an unsettling idea Crichton shared after that relentless climactic showdown was shot. "We had wrapped the last scene, where I'm just sitting there after the Gunslinger has been destroyed, and Michael came up to me. He said he'd just thought of something: the camera could pan down to the bottom of my boot, and it would read, 'Property of Westworld'. I got chills just hearing it and said, 'Let's go back and shoot it!' But they had already torn the set down."

### ROBOTIC RIGHTS

Beyond its action and suspense, *Westworld* also touched on themes that remain culturally sensitive today, particularly the idea of human guests using female android companions for sexual gratification. The subject echoes themes explored in Bryan Forbes's *The Stepford Wives*, released just two years after *Westworld* and memorably featuring Richard Benjamin's wife, actor Paula Prentiss. That film famously examined the unsettling idea of women being replaced by obedient artificial doubles created to serve male desires.

Looking back, Benjamin remembers how quickly the cultural landscape was changing. "I was kind of naive," he admits. "When I did *Diary Of A Mad Housewife*, someone mentioned women's liberation, and I actually turned and said, 'What's that?' Then I realised

## BOLDLY GOING BEYOND?

### Taking a look at *Westworld's* intriguing yet short-lived first small-screen outing

In 1980, the TV series *Beyond Westworld* attempted to pick up where the original *Westworld* left off. It followed Delos' security chief, John Moore (played by Jim McMullan), as he battled rogue scientist Dr Simon Quaid (James Wainwright), who believed the robots should serve a higher purpose than superficial pleasures and set out to repurpose the malfunctioning bots for global domination. The pilot earned Primetime Emmy Awards nominations for its make-up and art direction, but the series struggled to find an audience. Only five episodes were produced, and just three aired. Fast-tracked production left little time to develop fully-realised storylines, and while the technology looked impressive for the time, the writing lacked the intellectual spark of Michael Crichton's original film.

Still, *Beyond Westworld* offered an early glimpse of how a cinematic world could be expanded into episodic television. Its brief run foreshadowed Jonathan Nolan's ambitious *Westworld* in 2016, which returned to the park with lavish production design, intricate plotting, and a far deeper exploration of the philosophical questions that were first raised decades earlier.



something big was happening, and the movie was actually about that."

More than 50 years after its release, *Westworld* continues to resonate. Benjamin was reminded of the film's enduring popularity during a recent revival screening. "A couple of years ago, they showed it in a big theatre here in LA and asked me to speak afterwards," he says. "Normally, I don't watch the film again; I just show up at the end. But my wife said, 'You should look at it, you haven't seen it in a long time.' I was surprised at how well it held up, and there were fans there who knew every line of dialogue and everything about it, so it was good that I caught up!" he laughs.

While a sequel, *Futureworld*, surfaced in 1976, followed by a TV show *Beyond Westworld* (see left), both failed to replicate the power of Crichton's original. Nevertheless, the enduring fascination eventually inspired Jonathan Nolan's TV adaptation for HBO, which aired from 2016 to 2022 and starred Anthony Hopkins, Ed Harris, James Marsden and Jeffrey Wright. Rather than comparing the show directly to the original film, Benjamin sees the more contemporary version as proof of the story's lasting relevance. "I'm just pleased that the original film still generates enough interest that people want to keep exploring that world."

### REALITY BITES

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *Westworld* today is how closely it thematically mirrors modern debates about artificial intelligence. Benjamin admits the pace of technological change can be unsettling. "I saw a clip online that looked like Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise fighting," he says. "But it wasn't them at all – it was completely generated. That's scary."

For someone who began his career before digital effects, the difference between practical filmmaking and computer-generated imagery remains significant. "There wasn't even CGI when we made *Westworld*," he says. "Everything was physically there. I still think there's a difference – CGI doesn't have weight. Gravity isn't pulling on it. If a character looks like they're in danger, it's because they actually are a little bit. Somewhere in the audience's brain, they know if it's real or not."

That tension between human authenticity and technological illusion lies at the heart of Crichton's vision. *Westworld* may have begun as a playful twist on Hollywood fantasy, but its central question remains profoundly unsettling. What happens when the machines designed to entertain us begin to understand the roles we have forced them to play? More than half a century following its release, that question feels more relevant than ever. ●

*Westworld* is available on 4K and Blu-ray from Arrow Video.

# RAY NAYLER

Alien minds? The novelist exploring how different creatures see the world

Words by Jonathan Wright // Portrait by Anna Kuznetsova

**M**ANY OF THE CREATURES THAT WE share this Earth with don't do so well around humans. Crows are an exception. "They are highly intelligent, creative, tool-using animals," says novelist Ray Nayler. "They also exist on this sort of damaged fringe, in a way that's unusual, right?" Think of the way crows descend to forage on battlefields or fields where crops have been harvested.

Nayler remembers visiting tide pools in California with his daughter. When a school group left the area, down came the crows. "I asked one of the local rangers what was going on, because you don't usually see crows in California at tide pools," he says. "She said, 'Well, the crows know that when school groups come to the tide pools, the children are not very aware, and they step on snails. So the crows know that after a school group arrives, there will be a meal from all the snails the children have trod upon and left.'"

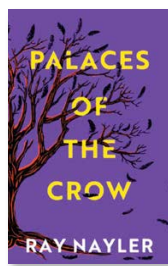
Smart thinking. So how might crows do in an actual war zone? It's a scenario explored in Nayler's new novel, *Palaces Of The Crow*, which is largely set in Lithuania in 1941. This was the year Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, his attempt to conquer the western USSR and, following the mass deportation or extermination of native populations, repopulate it with Germans.

At the centre of the book lie a quartet of youngsters whose lives are turned upside down by conflict: Neriya, a Jewish girl who wants to be a scientist; Czeslaw, an underage Polish deserter; Kezia, a Roma horse trader; and an abandoned boy who cannot speak. All have reason to fear both the Nazis and the Red Army. Deep in the woods, the quartet encounter crows far more sophisticated than those we see around us.

## WAYS OF SEEING

At its core, says Nayler, the book is about the bond between his four protagonists, but also a "thread of care" that crosses the species barrier as, at different points, humans and crows help each other. "I think we under-examine our relationship with animals, especially animals that are not our pets or not domesticated," he says.

It's a theme that fascinates Nayler. His 2022 novel *The Mountain In The Sea* dealt with the discovery of a hyper-smart octopus species off the coast of Vietnam. You might expect this interest to have begun with a love of the natural world, which it partly did, but Nayler also talks about going to Turkmenistan after joining the Peace Corps. He had no idea what to expect because, as he says, "You try to imagine what Turkmenistan would even be like. You just have no picture in your head."



## BIODATA

From  
Quebec, Canada

Greatest Hits  
*The Mountain In The Sea* won the 2023 Locus Award for Best First Novel.  
*The Tusks Of Extinction* (2024), about bringing back the woolly mammoth, won the Hugo Award for Best Novella.  
Near-future thriller *Where The Axe Is Buried* followed in 2025.

Random Fact  
Nayler is heavily influenced by cinema. "If you asked me what my five favourite science fiction books were, they would all be films," he says.

Having never left the Americas, he found himself in Central Asia "among people whose way of seeing the world and whose ideas were just completely different from my own". The Turkmens had no word for green, but described things as "leaf blue". Teaching English, he found that his pupils found phrasal verbs such as standing up for yourself or dropping an idea difficult to grasp. Communication between humans, he learnt at first hand, let alone across a species barrier, is complex. "I came to realise that even human beings really see the world in these fundamentally different ways," he says.

Nayler didn't mind this. Just the opposite. "The experience was not alienating," he says, "It was wonderful!"

## LISTENING BRIEF

At least part of the reason seems to lie in Nayler's childhood. As a young child, his parents split up and his French-Canadian father took him to Quebec. His mother hired a private detective to find her son. "I don't remember this very well, and I don't remember any sense of trauma, but certainly it's there somewhere," he says. He learnt to read before he had even attended kindergarten. Later, his mother came out as a lesbian – not easy in the Californian suburbs back then. "Everyone in the family then became burdened by all of the anti-gay sentiment that she had to deal with that was also thrown at us as her children."

In the wake of living in Turkmenistan, Nayler got a job with American Councils For International Education, and worked in the former USSR and even Afghanistan. He then joined the US Foreign Service. When we speak, Nayler is taking time out from his day job at the Nuclear Risk Reduction Center, part of the US Department of State.

Throughout his life he has written, and his diplomatic career, he says, has helped. How? He answers by contrasting two US writers of the so-called lost generation (those born between 1893 and 1900): Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. While, "every character in a Hemingway novel is Ernest Hemingway", Dos Passos was instead someone who went out into the world and sought out other people's stories.

"I realised that I really wanted to be like John Dos Passos," Nayler says. "I wanted to listen, I wanted to open myself up and hear what people were saying." He wanted, as best he could, to try to understand their perspectives. By contrast, he found he was "completely uninterested in some fundamental way" in his own opinions. Maybe it's this, he says, that makes him "a natural science fiction writer". ●

*Palaces Of The Crow* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson on 21 May.



“I realised I wanted to be like John Dos Passos – to open myself up”



# SPRING IS EPIC

Welcome to several universes of adventures without ever having to leave the house – thanks to Epic Movies on 4K Ultra HD WORDS: LUKE SMITH

IT'S TIME TO GET BACK ON THE GRID AS THE EPIC Movies promotion returns for Spring 2026 – perfect for Father's Day, the World Cup kick off and film-watching parties for fans who want to experience home cinema in the best possible way.

Starting a cycle – see what we did there – that would span multiple decades, the original *Tron* blew filmgoers away in 1982. The sci-fi adventure was years ahead of its time and, as technology has evolved, it's continued to wow film fans with *Tron: Legacy* in 2010 and, most recently, *Tron: Ares* in 2025.

Both *Tron: Ares* on 4K Ultra HD and *The Tron Franchise 3-Movie Collection* Blu-ray are available as part of the Epic Movies promotion, running until 21 June.

But it's not just the *Tron* saga – there are tons of films available to buy at special prices on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray and DVD.

Travel to Earth-828 and meet Marvel's First Family in *The Fantastic Four: First Steps* as they take on world-devourer Galactus and begin a journey that's going to rock the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Then nip back to Earth-616 to witness the latest line-up changes for Earth's Mightiest Heroes in Marvel Studio's

*Thunderbolts\**, aka *The New Avengers*!

Journey not just to distant worlds and places, but also through time to get the full story of the extraterrestrial trophy hunters the Yautja in the *Predator 5-Movie Collection*.

Or witness the rebirth of one of their deadliest enemies, the xenomorph, on a space station in orbit above LV-410 in *Alien: Romulus*.

For film fans and collectors who value the big-screen experience and want to continue it in the comfort of their own home, 4K Ultra HD is the definitive format – and there's a 2 for £30 offer on selected 4K Ultra HD titles as part of the Epic Movies promotion.

As well as outstanding picture and sound quality, you'll also have access to a wealth of extra features which open the worlds of filmmaking and fandom even further, making your high-definition experience even more immersive.

What are you waiting for? Start building your physical media collection now! Your future (and multiverse) self will thank you for it...

*The Epic Movies promotion is available now at Amazon, HMV, and Rarewaves until 21 June.*



## RETURN TO THE GRID

Director Joachim Rønning on building the world of *Tron: Ares*

"We have over 2100 VFX shots in the movie. A lot of VFX artists are in the industry because of the original *Tron*. So you get a lot of love and people wanting to work weekends because they want to be a part of that. You're expected to push the envelope on every level and in every department. There are so many moving parts, so it's very, very challenging, but then it's also very rewarding.

"It felt original and big, and like a great next natural step in the evolution of *Tron*.

"It was a tremendous undertaking. We closed down Vancouver for six weeks of nights and tore it apart, and as much as possible was real, and you can feel that when you watch the film, it feels next level."



JUNE  
2026

edited by Ian Berriman

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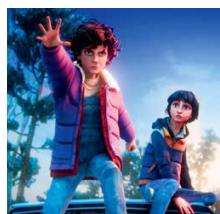
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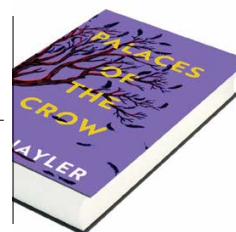
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A baby with no helmet? On a bike? Oh Mando.

## THE MANDALORIAN AND GROGU

### The Child's Play

★★★★☆

▶ **RELEASED 22 MAY**

12A | 132 minutes

▶ Director **Jon Favreau**

▶ Cast **Pedro Pascal, Sigourney Weaver, Jeremy Allen White, Jonny Coyne**

🗨️ **The first *Star Wars* film in more than six years** moves away from the core Skywalker saga, and even the lore from the streaming series it's following on from, resulting in an enjoyable-in-passing standalone that's unlikely to be regarded as a key part of the movie canon in the long term.

Director Jon Favreau – creator of *The Mandalorian* on Disney+ – makes this instalment very approachable, but at the cost of personality and greater franchise significance. The third season wrapped up pretty tidily, with

Mandalorian bounty hunter Din Djarin (Pedro Pascal, with Brendan Wayne and Lateef Crowder also credited for some of the suit work) adopting his young charge, Grogu. A new mission for Mando – now accepting morally-upright bounties from Sigourney Weaver's New Republic colonel, Ward – has him sent to retrieve Jabba's nephew Rotta (Jeremy Allen White), a shredded Hutt who's working under contract as a gladiator.

In what will no doubt be appealing to a certain chunk of this film's potential audience, *The Mandalorian And Grogu* can feel like action-figure cinema. Strutting around in his Beskar armour and kitted out like a walking Swiss Army knife (swords, flamethrowers, jet packs), Mando

often feels like the ultimate edition of a toy. Favreau stages a multitude of set-pieces that throw him into various environments against various adversaries (droids, beasts, fellow bounty hunters) with the gusto of a kid let loose on a playset, albeit a kid with a good eye for scale. The opening sequence – built around the apprehension of an Imperial warlord, and an AT-AT escape – is particularly good fun.

But while this film doesn't oblige viewers to watch three seasons of TV to understand what's going on, it also doesn't particularly reward invested fans who might be hoping for the lore to be meaningfully moved along. Even the titular father/son relationship doesn't exactly develop: Grogu is cute as ever, whether snacking, burbling or bouncing on the bed, and there's a

pleasing commitment to the practical puppetry that made him so delightful on the small screen. But he's given little opportunity to grow in a film that can feel like two (action-packed) episodes welded together. The fact that certain characters drop in and out for large spells also adds to that sense, which the large-scale spectacle only partially mitigates.

There are a handful of familiar faces that the faithful will get a kick out of, but their presence won't confuse newcomers. Like the unflappable Mando, this film has the resources at its disposal to get in, do its job efficiently, and get out. But it ultimately plays it too safe to reinstate *Star Wars* as a force to be reckoned with on the big screen. **Matt Maytum**

**i** Guillermo del Toro is acknowledged in the credits for input on the Hutts; he once almost made his own Jabba movie.

## TOM AND JERRY: FORBIDDEN COMPASS

### An absolute cat-astrophe

★☆☆☆☆

▶ **RELEASED 22 MAY**

PG | 99 minutes

▶ Directors Zhang Gang

▶ Cast Matthew Yang King, Roger Craig Smith, AJ Beckles, Vincent Tong

🔗 **How on earth do you make a *Tom And Jerry* cartoon so bad that it's almost too painful to watch?**

This Chinese creation does at least open promisingly, as Jerry cheerfully bounces through Manhattan on his way to an exhibition. But the museum's security guard is Tom, who refuses to let Jerry inside. The two tussle for a few minutes in a manner reminiscent of their old charms – all slapstick and silliness – until an ancient compass magically

sends them back in time. Suddenly, they're in a Chinese golden city... and this isn't a Tom and Jerry movie any more. They fade disappointingly into the background, leaving their names on the movie poster to lure in audiences without delivering on their presence.

Instead, we follow a baddie, Mega Rat, along with gods, gargoyles, a weird unicorn, temple guardians and a giant chicken-phoenix thing. Lots of characters

“A frantic, incoherent and maddening mess”



It was probably not the best hiding place.

want the magical compass and never stop babbling about their plans, yet nothing makes sense. God help any small kids watching, who won't understand a word, even though it has been dubbed into English. Most egregious of all, there's a sexy/sexist cat girl who serves as Tom's love interest – and to lure in Furrries, perhaps?

There's the odd beautifully rendered moment, particularly

during flashbacks, which hints that this could possibly have been a better film if it had been stripped back, lost half its characters and removed 90% of the noise. Instead it's a frantic, incoherent and maddening mess. Tom and Jerry need a better agent.

Jayne Nelson

**i** For 1940's "Puss Gets The Boot", their first toon, Tom was named Jasper and Jerry (not named on-screen) was known as Jinx.

## MORTAL KOMBAT II

### Far from a flawless victory

★☆☆☆☆

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

15 | 115 minutes

▶ Director Simon McQuoid

▶ Cast Karl Urban, Adeline Rudolph, Jessica McNamee, Josh Lawson

🔗 **There's no denying that Simon McQuoid's *Mortal Kombat* films are faithful to their source material. The videogames consist of two people hitting each other until body parts begin falling off – and the same is true of their cinematic counterparts. In this sequel, the titular tournament is used as an excuse to string together one action scene after another, often ending with a gory finishing move.**

*Mortal Kombat II* is also faithful to the videogames' fondness for taking their mythology far too seriously, folding in a quest for a mystical MacGuffin and a lot of

awfully straight-faced fantasy exposition. McQuoid and new screenwriter Jeremy Slater (*Fant4stic*) do at least have the good sense to sideline Cole Young – the audience surrogate invented for the first film, who has all the charisma of a fighter you'd make yourself in a character-creator menu – in favour of two new leads lifted from the games' roster.

Johnny Cage (Karl Urban) is a washed-up action movie star whose signature moves include putting on his sunglasses with a raised middle finger and punching his opponent in the crotch. Meanwhile, steel fan-wielding

“Has a fondness for taking the mythology far too seriously”



"This is fine."

Kitana (Adeline Rudolph) is clearly meant to be the heart of the film, with her Gamora-esque backstory of an adoptive father who murdered her real parents. But masked muscleman Shao Kahn (Martyn Ford) is no Thanos.

In fact, every attempt at emotional heft comes off as tonally jarring: in one scene, the soundtrack and script seem to be trying to put a lump in the throat

as you watch a man being torn to shreds by a spinning hat. Next time – and the ending makes a clear promise that there will be a next time – McQuoid might be better off skipping the mushy stuff. Unless we're talking about the contents of a fighter's skull.

Alex Spencer

**i** Villain Noob Saibot is named after series creators Ed Boon – who makes a Stan Lee-style cameo here – and John Tobias.



Can't wait for *Scum* reboot  
Lee Cronin's  
*The Daddy*.

## LEE CRONIN'S THE MUMMY

### Demon Seed

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

18 | 133 minutes

▶ Director Lee Cronin

▶ Cast Jack Reynor, Laia Costa,

Natalie Grace, Verónica Falcón,

Shylo Molina, Billie Roy, Emily Mitchell

➔ **After pumping fresh life into** Deadites with *Evil Dead Rises*, Irish filmmaker Lee Cronin now resurrects another monster staple in *Lee Cronin's The Mummy*. He does so for Blumhouse, the horror stable behind the *Invisible Man* and *Wolf Man* reboots.

But before we decry a lack of originality, let's consider that monster mashing (rehashing?) has always been a big part of horror. The only question that really matters is whether Cronin does it well enough to deserve that

possessive title, an honour previously afforded to such genre icons as John Carpenter, Wes Craven and Guillermo del Toro.

What's clear, early doors, is that this isn't going to be your standard mummy movie in which an ancient Egyptian priest trails bandages as he shuffles after victims. Here, the Cannon family – dad Charlie (Jack Reynor), mum Larissa (Laia Costa), granny Carmen (Verónica Falcón) and kids Sebastián and Maud (Shylo Molina, Billie Roy) – are devastated when third child Katie

“More demonic possession flick than mummy movie”

(Emily Mitchell) is abducted in Cairo. Then, eight years later, with the Cannons now living in Albuquerque, Katie is found among the debris of a plane crash. In a sarcophagus.

A smuggling tactic in a child-trafficking operation is proposed, but then why does the near-catatonic Katie (now played by Natalie Grace) look like something dug up, with long nails like a beast's horny talons? And why is she given to munching scorpions, vomiting what looks like pea soup and straining sinews as she arches her clacky spine and levitates off her bed?

As the last sentence suggests, *Lee Cronin's The Mummy* is more demonic possession flick than mummy movie. It's essentially *The Exorcist* spliced with *Evil Dead*,

and like the director's previous film, it throbs with gnarly body horror (a toenail-cutting scene outdoes the cheese grater in *Rises*) while focusing on a family being torn apart. Also like *Rises*, it builds to a frenziedly ferocious final act that will have some viewers wishing they'd heeded Larissa's warning when she earlier told her hubby, “It's too much for you to stomach.”

Cronin does little that we've not seen before, many times over. But he does it well, with intensity, and through it all bubbles humour blacker than blood in the midnight moonlight.

Remember when Elliott was drunk at school, linked to ET's feelings? Cronin does a very similar thing here, only it's a possessed Katie controlling her little sister. The difference? Elliott refrained from calling his teacher a “rat-faced c\*\*t”...

Jamie Graham

i Arjen Tuiten's make-up for the mummy was partly inspired by preserved bog bodies at the National Museum of Ireland.

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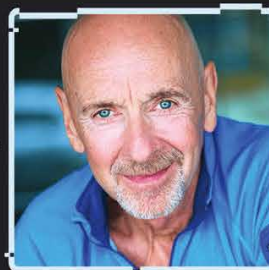
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TV

## STRANGER THINGS: TALES FROM '85 Season One

Untold tales from the void between seasons

★★★★★

▶ UK/US Netflix, streaming now

▶ Showrunner Eric Robles

▶ Cast Luca Diaz, Braxton Quinney, Elisha Williams, Ben Plessala

**EPISODES 1.01-1.10** The finale of *Stranger Things* left the online community demanding more. Well, here's more... but it's not the "secret, real final episode that addresses all the continuity errors in the final season" they craved (and which only ever existed in their imaginations).

Instead, *Stranger Things: Tales From '85* is a 10-part CG animated spin-off, set between seasons two and three, concentrating on team

*D&D*. And while it's a little lightweight compared to its older sibling, it's a lot more fun than 90 minutes of retconning would have been. This is *Stranger Things* unashamedly in '80s action 'toon mode, albeit with top quality 2020s animation rather than five frames an hour 2D or whatever it was *He-Man* was filmed in. The high-contrast palette is authentically '80s, though.

It's the depths of a snowy winter in Hawkins. Eleven is secretly in Hopper's hut while Mike, Dustin and co are planning more *D&D* campaigns and dealing with school bullies. After new kid Nikki, a proud punk rock freak,

rescues Will from a beating, the two outsiders strike up a friendship. Nikki's mum is the temporary science supply teacher, but even with geek-pleasing cred like that, Mike's wary of bringing her into the party. She's the least of their worries, though, as a new threat – an apparent hybrid of a Demogorgon and the local Hawkins flora – is lurking under the snow, ensnaring unwary kids for parasitic use.

Despite the fact that none of the TV cast have returned to voice their characters, and only a handful of older characters like Hopper, Steve and Nancy make brief appearances, *Tales From '85* doesn't feel like a cheap knock-off. In so many ways it captures the spirit of those earlier episodes, though in a more plot- and action-driven framework, and most of the characters feel spot on – the exceptions being Will, who comes across as way more fun here, and El, who feels oddly muted. She also uses her powers like she's auditioning for the X-Men, on a near-constant basis.

The animation is top notch for TV, the stylised likenesses are great (especially Nancy and Steve), and the plot rattles along with enough twists, turns and mystery to keep things lively throughout. Nikki is such a great character you wish she'd met Eddie in the main series, while the Lovecraftian design for the creatures is "totally tubular" as Dustin might say.

Sure, it's *Stranger Things Lite* and the character development is cheesy and trite at times, but there's enough here for older fans who can't bear to say goodbye yet to enjoy, as well as for the kids.

Dave Golder

**i** Nikki listens to a 1997 remix of Suicidal Tendencies' "Possessed To Skate", first released in 1987 – so both after 1985.



## GOOD OMENS 3

★★★★★

▶ UK/US Prime Video,

streaming now

▶ Director Rachel Talalay

▶ Cast David Tennant, Michael

Sheen, Doon Mackichan, Bilal Hasna

**FINALE EPISODE** You can't help

watching *Good Omens'* swansong wondering what might have been. For reasons we won't go into again, it was cut from six episodes to one 90-minute finale, with a new director and new writers parachuted in. The result is creaky, rushed, and not quite as comically inventive, but crucially it does give Aziraphale (Michael Sheen) and Crowley (David Tennant) a worthy send off: the denouement and epilogue are heart-wrenchingly bittersweet.

With heaven pushing on with the Second Coming, Aziraphale is trying to make sure it ends in something more upbeat than Armageddon. Jesus is resurrected and sent to Earth, where he receives some vague but fateful advice from a titanically pissed Crowley, who's drowning his sorrows on a biblical level. And then archangels start disappearing, along with the Book of Life.

It all looks stunning, with some delightfully quirky imagery and playful effects that ramp up the Gillianesque vibe in the show's idiosyncratic visuals. The main plot is serviceable enough, though the subplots are woefully underdeveloped, with the fizzling Jesus storyline especially hinting at a bigger story that's been lost. But as a vehicle for Tennant and Sheen to do their loveable shtick, it delivers magnificently.

Dave Golder

"If you listen carefully, you can hear three paragraphs."



## STAR WARS: MAUL — SHADOW LORD Season One

### The Maul Guy

★★★★★

UK/US Disney+, streaming now

► Creator **Dave Filoni**

► Cast **Sam Witwer, Wagner Moura, Gideon Adlon, Dennis Haysbert**

**EPISODES 1.01-1.10** **Darth Maul's** posthumous career has been more successful than that of his former master. While Emperor Palpatine's comeback in *The Rise Of Skywalker* was widely (and rightly) ridiculed, Maul has become one of the undisputed stars of *Star Wars'* various animated TV series. But this, his debut as a headline act, may just be his finest hour.

*Shadow Lord* isn't the first Disney+ spin-off to put the spotlight on an iconic villain, but unlike *The Book Of Boba Fett*, this

show manages to keep its protagonist's bad boy mystique intact. Sure, there are moments when Maul does the right thing – not always, of course, for the right reasons – but the Dark Side of the Force still flows through him. Sometimes the aggressor, sometimes the victim, Darth Sidious's former apprentice is a character with impressive layers of nuance. Despite the medium, he's the antithesis of a cartoon villain.

Indeed, one of the main themes of this excellent 10-part season is the question of whether your enemy's enemy is actually your friend. Here, several years after the Order 66 purge in *Revenge Of The Sith*, Maul's crime lord



Few could match him in the stare-off stakes.

aspirations cross paths with a pair of fugitive Jedi and a cop who's simply trying to do the right thing. All of them find themselves in the crosshairs of an Empire that's still tightening its grip on the galaxy, but can they trust each other enough to survive?

Set across a few days on the previously unseen planet of Janix, *Shadow Lord* plays out as a fast-paced crime thriller and is, at

times, nearly as tense as *Andor*. It also looks phenomenal, with human brushstrokes adding extra depth and texture to the animation, alongside some of the best lightsaber scraps in the history of the franchise. More than a match for most of its live-action counterparts. **Richard Edwards**

**I** 2BOT (aka Two Boots) isn't the first *Star Wars* droid voiced by Richard Ayoade. He also played Q9-0 in *The Mandalorian*.

## WIDOW'S BAY Season One

### Unholy Island

★★★★☆

UK/US Apple TV, streaming now,

Wednesdays

► Showrunner **Katie Dippold**

► Cast **Matthew Rhys, Kate O'Flynn, Stephen Root, Dale Dickey**

**EPISODES 1.01-1.10** **If you thought** *Midnight Mass* was the last word in remote island-set gothic supernatural horror, Apple TV would like a word. Not that *Widow's Bay* is a *Midnight Mass* clone. It comes close at times, but at others it's just as close to *Twin Peaks*, *An American Werewolf In London*, *Jaws*, *Halloween*, *Lost* and *Inside No 9*. That it moulds all of this into something approaching a consistent whole is impressive, though you may suffer some tonal seasickness.

*Widow's Bay* is a town on an isolated island off New England, where mayor Tom Loftis

(Matthew Rhy) is as desperate to attract tourists as he is to get reliable internet. But *Widow's Bay* is cursed and has a history of extreme weather conditions, serial killers and spooky goings on. Plus, nobody born there ever leaves. It's going to be a hard sell for Loftis, especially as the weird shit is cranking up again.

The series takes a while to reveal its true colours. For the first few episodes, with its roster of quirky characters, 15-friendly scares, dour humour and brooding atmosphere, it's watchable, but nothing special. Then it starts going off-piste, taking unexpected turns, including a downright harrowing flashback episode set in

“**Sadly, the finale feels a little mundane**”



“We’ve been waiting 45 minutes for our starter.”

1702 and another spotlighting Loftis's misfit colleague Patricia (played with a creepy intensity by Kate O'Flynn), which has a folk horror denouement worthy of *The Wicker Man*. Plus we get a guest appearance by *Midnight Mass*'s Hamish Linklater as a zombie town elder, providing the blackest of black comedy. Oh, and there's an accidental overdose episode that's disorientating as hell.

Sadly the finale feels a little mundane after all that exquisite batshitery, and is hampered by a few too many “please give us a second season” loose ends. But if season two can continue pulling off those surprises, we'll be back. Even if the tourists aren't.

**Dave Golder**

**I** *Widow's Bay* started life as a spec script showrunner Katie Dippold wrote to try to get hired on *Parks And Recreation*.

## INVADERS FROM MARS

### The Velvet Underground

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1953 | PG | 4K/Blu-ray

▶ Director William Cameron Menzies

▶ Cast Helena Carter, Arthur Franz,

Jimmy Hunt, Leif Erickson

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Up there in the pantheon of great '50s sci-fi films, *Invaders From Mars* is a movie an eight-year-old could easily enjoy, but also holds considerable appeal for grown-ups, thanks to director William Cameron Menzies's striking production design, which at times borders on both expressionism and surrealism.

Jimmy Hunt plays young David, who wakes in the wee hours to see a spacecraft landing in a sandpit over the hill. When his father investigates, he returns strangely changed, a mysterious mark on the back of his neck. Soon a general,

the police chief and two cops are also under the influence – sucked beneath the earth into passageways tunnelled by Martians who, feeling threatened by an atomic rocket project, have come here bent on sabotage.

Tapping into the fear that your loving family might grow cold and uncaring (pre-empting Jack Finney's *The Body Snatchers*), the story is charmingly elementary. The gallumphing, paunchy Martian mutants are rather cuddly, their green velvet suits faintly recalling the Teletubbies.

Menzies's forced-perspective sets – a path winding through stark black tree trunks to a fence bordering the sandpit; the long walk up to a police station's front desk – have the simplicity of a child's drawing. It's a film that feels very much presented from a

kid's POV, which makes perfect sense come the twist ending.

A surfeit of stock footage added by a producer to boost the run time is the only fly in the ointment: countless pointless scenes of tanks being loaded up for transport, or firing from different directions. They never feel properly integrated, and periodically put the brakes on what is otherwise a pretty pacey affair.

▶ **Extras** This BFI release has two brand new bonuses. Film writers Kim Newman and Barry Forshaw provide a well-informed commentary, while Nic Wassell's decent video essay (16 minutes) tackles topics like Menzies's philosophy of production design.

Another three substantial featurettes are carried over from Ignite Films' 2022 US release. A 22-minute piece covers all the main points of interest, as industry luminaries (including John Landis, Joe Dante and effects whizz Robert Skotak) shower the film with garlands.

Actor Jimmy Hunt (11 minutes) has an amusing anecdote about accidentally getting socked in the kisser by his on-screen dad after failing to hit his mark properly. Over the course of 16 minutes, Menzies's biographer charts his life, then invites the director's granddaughter to supply a few reminiscences.

Extra footage shot for the European release includes eight deathly dull minutes of expository padding on the universe, Mars and UFOs, as well as an alternate ending which nixes the "it was all a dream" pay-off.

Plus: seven minutes of before/after comparisons showcasing the restoration work; a film festival intro by director John Sayles; a gallery of stills, pressbook materials and posters; trailers; 32-page booklet.

Ian Berriman

Thousands of inflated condoms were used to create the "bubbled-up" look of the tunnel walls blasted by the Martians.



## HAMMER: HEROES, LEGENDS AND MONSTERS

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2024 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Benjamin Field

▶ **Originally made for Sky**, this 90th anniversary celebration recounts the history of Britain's most blood-splashed studio. It's a pacy, candid watch – Madeline Smith discloses some particularly unpleasant experiences on the set of *The Vampire Lovers* – and one that finds time to salute such crucial but unsung talents as cinematographer Jack Asher.

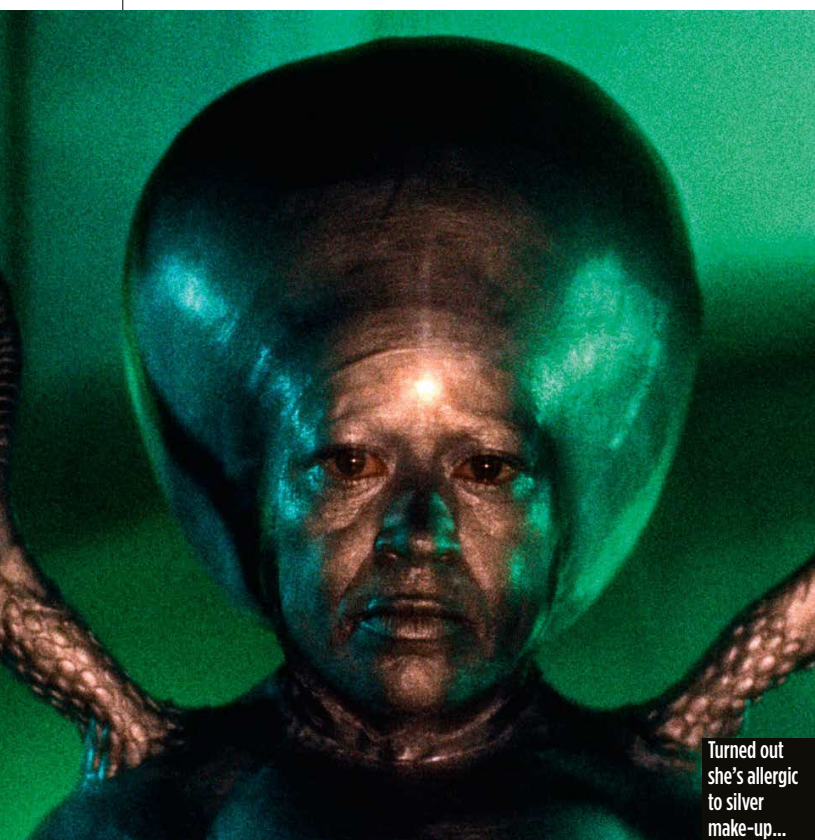
Hollywood horror masters Tim Burton, John Carpenter, John Landis and Joe Dante supply big-name talking heads, revealing how these X-cert classics shook up their psyches.

Only spoiled by a brief digital resurrection of Peter Cushing – ghoulish in the wrong way – this is an informative if abridged account of how the house of Hammer became such a prime piece of screen real estate.

▶ **Extras** An alternative, "pre-broadcast" edit replaces Charles Dance's narration with Hammer icon Valerie Leon. Seven of the interviews get extended cuts (approx 118 minutes in total), providing especially welcome deep dives into the memories of the stars and screenwriter John Logan, who reveals Hammer's influence on *Penny Dreadful*. Elsewhere a behind-the-scenes featurette is chiefly a delightful record of Madeline Smith cracking up at sex education in the '50s (10 minutes).

Plus: trailer.

Nick Setchfield



Turned out she's allergic to silver make-up...

## TAXIDERMIA

### The stuff of nightmares

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 18 MAY**

2006 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director György Pálfi

▶ Cast Csaba Czene, Gergely Trócsányi, Marc Bischoff, István Gyuricza

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** A shot of a penis shooting flame quickly establishes that this mordant, absurdist Hungarian production is not for the faint-hearted. Its imagery gets progressively more challenging, from earthy physicality (an early cut juxtaposes ejaculation and the dismbowelling of a pig) into wine-inducing body horror.

Based on stories by Lajos Parti Nagy, it's three shorts, set in different decades, glued together. First we see army orderly Vendel's miserable existence during WW2. Chapter two centres on his offspring Kálmán, a Communist-era champion speed eater. Finally,

the focus moves to his son Lajoska, a lonely professional taxidermist.

Eating before viewing is inadvisable, as after Kálmán shovels up cubes of horse sausage, he pukes in CG-assisted torrents. The final segment recalls both Monty Python and Jörg Buttgerit: Lajoska's father is now a grotesque Mr Creosote figure, while the taxidermist has constructed an apparatus that'll allow him to stuff himself; brace for close-ups of sliced flesh and organ removal.

Unfolding in grotesque tableaux, painted with a sickly palette, it's visually striking. The only grand theme seems to be that we're all walking sacks of meat. But the extreme imagery has real impact. Few films evoke such a powerful visceral response.

➔ **Extras** This Radiance release has two new bonuses. A 26-minute interview sees director György



The things people do for an Instagram selfie.

Pálfi's discussing his intentions: creating a "free associative" film, structured like a poem. *Sight And Sound's* Michael Brooke provides a witty, well-prepped commentary.

An excellent Making Of (42 minutes) offers plenty of glimpses behind the scenes, and there are 39 minutes of deleted scenes. An extensive gallery showcases the work of art designer Géza Szöllösi, facilitating appreciation of quirky

details like a taxidermy hamster purse. There are two shorts by the director: "A Hal" (28 minutes), follows a naive fish stall worker, while superhero tale "Táltosember vs Ikaru" (23 minutes) concerns an attempt to destroy the sun with a flying bus (!). Plus: music video; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

**i** Lajos Parti Nagy, author of the original short stories, makes a cameo appearance as a dead man lying in a bath tub.

## THE MAN WHO HAUNTED HIMSELF

### Roger Roger

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1970 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray/digital

▶ Director Basil Dearden

▶ Cast Roger Moore, Hildegard Neil, Anton Rodgers, Olga Georges-Picot

➔ **Roger Moore was incurably** self-deprecating, forever mocking the talent behind that precision-engineered twinkle. But he always championed his turn in this slick, spooky adaptation of the 1957 novel *The Strange Case Of Mr Pelham*, by Anthony Armstrong.

It's two turns, in fact: stuffy, repressed businessman and demonically grinning doppelganger, a flesh and blood phantom seemingly conjured into existence by a car crash. Post-Saint

and pre-Bond, Moore gets to show genuine range as his world unravels. In a way it's 007's psyche cleaved in two: fine gentleman and debauched bounder.

Basil Dearden's imaginative direction is showcased to good effect in this excellent 4K restoration. And while the Moore vs Moore illusion is chiefly sold by the performance there's one old-school effects sequence where you'll definitely be asking "How the hell did they do that?"

➔ **Extras** Actor Kevork Malikyan (12 minutes) provides first-hand testimony in the one brand new bonus. Three features are ported over from Imprint Films' 2024 Australian release: a 32-minute featurette quizzes co-star Freddie



Moore, and then some more Moore.

Jones and five members of the crew; Moore's PA Gareth Owen gives some useful background to the production (16 minutes); and film historians Jonathan Rigby and Kevin Lyons provide commentary.

You also get a 2006 discussion (18 minutes) between Joe Dante and Stuart Gordon which explores the film's Hitchcockian undertones, and – a boon for swinging bachelor pads

everywhere – a suite of Michael J Lewis's loungecore classic of a score (36 minutes). A comprehensive gallery is accompanied by a set of storyboards, giving a great insight into how Dearden structured the film's extraordinary climax. Plus: trailer; four art cards. **Nick Setchfield**

**i** On 23 March 1971 Basil Dearden died in a car accident on the same stretch of the M4 where Pelham crashes in the film.

## DOCTOR WHO: THE MOVIE

### Eighth wonder

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 25 MAY**

1996 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray

▶ Director Geoffrey Sax

▶ Cast Paul McGann, Daphne Ashbrook, Sylvester McCoy, Eric Roberts

🔗 **It was the bright blip in *Doctor Who*'s so-called Wilderness Years, a pilot for a whole new transatlantic take on the Time Lord that proved to be a glorious dead end.**

It's unmistakably a '90s artefact, from the steampunk styling of the TARDIS interior to a Master in *Terminator* cosplay. There's even a nod to *Wayne's World* ("No way!" "Yes, way!"). Paul McGann makes for a twinkly Romantic poet of an Eighth Doctor, while director Geoffrey Sax elevates the visuals.

The title *The Movie* always felt a little misleading but this impressive 30th anniversary 4K

release, diligently assembled from original film materials, finally matches those cinematic aspirations. Yes, way.

🔗 **Extras** We get the uncensored, marginally more violent original UK cut alongside the American broadcast version. Sax makes for an affable if self-critical subject in an "In Conversation" piece with Matthew Sweet (62 minutes) that encompasses the whole arc of his career. It's a useful insight into a man with the briefest of associations with *Doctor Who*, but some may wish for more on *The Movie* itself.

Sharper focus is provided in entertaining new interviews with stars Eric and Eliza Roberts, Daphne Ashbrook and Yee Jee Tso (20 minutes apiece). Elsewhere '80s *Who* companion Janet Fielding – McGann's agent at the time – is teamed with Sylvester



"Er... the bottom line is D, V, O, J... is that an M?"

McCoy for an equally diverting chinwag, bonding over memories of madcap theatrical venture *The Ken Campbell Roadshow*, complete with archive clips of the future Seventh Doctor rocking the funkier of '70s moustaches.

Also included are some inessential deleted and alternative scenes (three minutes in total) and a scrapped intro with a voiceover by the Master that's clearly not as

effective as McGann's broadcast narration (two minutes), along with digital effects tests showing the ambitions and limitations of mid-'90s tech (11 minutes).

Plus: audio commentaries and various special features carried over from previous releases.

**Nick Setchfield**

**I** Geoffrey Sax was asked to direct Christopher Eccleston's first two episodes in the 2005 revival of *Doctor Who*.



### BRUTE 1976

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2025 | 18 | Digital

🔗 **This retro-tinged gore-fest** overtly nods to *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, but it's an unflattering comparison. A group of friends head into the desert for a photoshoot but are quickly set upon by murderous locals, one of whom wields, yes, a chainsaw.

It's clichéd stuff, reasonably well produced, but far too long at 105 minutes. It does, however, feature a memorably gross/funny kill involving a very fake-looking penis and a drill. If you like the sound of that then perhaps this is for you.

**Will Salmon**



### DIABOLIC

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 25 MAY**

2025 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

🔗 **Not one person makes a** good decision in this daft possession horror. Not the therapist who sends a patient experiencing violent blackouts out to a cabin in the woods unchaperoned. Not the girl who trips on ayahuasca in the middle of nowhere. And definitely not the boyfriend who, following an ersatz exorcism and a couple of demon sightings, decides to get drunk instead of driving home. A couple of decent jump scares aside, there's really nothing to recommend it.

🔗 **Extras** None. **Sarah Dobbs**



### VOIDANCE

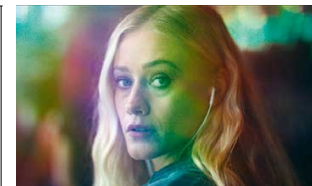
★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 25 MAY**

2026 | 15 | Digital

🔗 **Facing her final assessment,** a security agent gameplays a prospective terrorist attack on a space station bar, reliving the scenario in a looping virtual mock-up.

A mix of *Babylon 5* and *Groundhog Day*, dressed in blue-collar *Alien* style, this ambitious British indie puts up a valiant fight against a visible lack of money. But while there are intriguing flashes of worldbuilding and some clever narrative mechanics, the simulated, repetitive nature of the investigation works against the drama. **Nick Setchfield**



### TOUCH ME

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

2026 | 18 | Blu-ray/digital

🔗 **This oddball body-horror** details a woman's relationship with an alien whose tentacular touch quiets the mind – addictively so. Visiting his luxury pad, she and her gay housemate compete for his love, and learn his true nature...

Quirky details – the alien's velour tracksuits, phrases like "queef juice" – are juxtaposed with "live-action hentai". But the contrast with accounts of childhood abuse proves jarring. **Extras** Commentary; three shorts; web series *Kappa Force*; 2022 feature *Hypochondriac* and related bonuses. **Ian Berriman**

## FORBIDDEN WORLD

### Alien Reproduction

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1982 | 15 | 4K & Blu-ray

▶ Director Allan Holzman

▶ Cast Jesse Vint, Dawn Dunlap,  
June Chadwick, Linden Chiles

#### BLU-RAY DEBUT This New World

Pictures production was Roger Corman's second attempt to rip off *Alien* by, er, stapling hamburger trays to the walls of a corridor. Reusing a set from *Galaxy Of Terror*, models from *Battle Beyond The Stars*, and that rock formation from *Star Trek*, it's more libidinous than its predecessor.

Jesse Vint is a troubleshooter sent to a genetics lab on the planet Xarbia, where experiments to solve a food shortage have created a lifeform that slowly morphs into a giant, toothy monstrosity, turning personnel oblivious to the fact this is no time for a steam bath

into gelatinous piles of protein by injecting them with its DNA.

In-between gratuitous titillation like two naked women wiping each other down in a decontamination chamber, there's some nice use of overhead shots, and the odd decent idea, such as defeating the beast by making it absorb cancer cells. The gloopy effects are also impressively disgusting, and Alex Cox regular Fox Harris is amusingly twitchy as the station's sickly doctor (guess where they source the cancer...).

▶ **Extras** 88 Films' dual-format set offers the theatrical release (77 minutes) and a director's cut (82 minutes) that reinstates numerous brief trims. A two-part interview with director Alan Holzman (45/17 minutes) reveals an interesting character: a stutterer who rollerskated to work, he expounds a theory of film based on



Wilhelm Reich's concept of "orgastic potency" – and recounts how Corman lamped an audience member in a test screening.

A 21-minute video essay considers the film as one of the four SF movies Corman produced between *Alien* and *ET*. A 2010 retrospective with seven cast/crew (34 minutes) is carried over from a US release. Another archival interview, with a make-up effects

fella (14 minutes), leaves you with the indelible image of the guy in the monster suit mooning... The director's cut has commentary by Holzman; the theatrical edit gets tracks by two pairs of critics. Plus: a bit of Corman chat (six minutes); a gallery; radio and TV spots; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

**i** For a scene showing the aftermath of the creature's escape, the crew went to the pound and bought 50 dead cats and dogs.

# LSO

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## X-CROSS

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 18 MAY**

2007 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Kenta Fukasaku

▶ Cast Nao Matsushita, Ami Suzuki, Shoko Nakagawa, Maju Ozawa

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Like *One Missed*

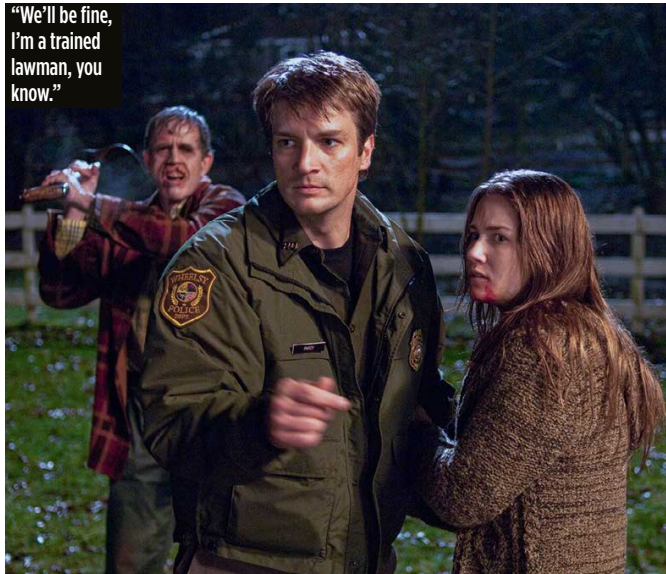
*Call* and *Ring*, this Japanese horror is fixated on phones, but otherwise it's a reaction against their ilk – goofier, less gloomy.

The core concept could slot into a Hammer horror: two women visit a rural village, and find it has a tradition of human sacrifice. We're let in on the secret from the get-go, and an exposition truck deposits its load 24 minutes in. Thankfully, using mobiles as a conduit for a trickle of new info, the script keeps us guessing, uncertain who Shiyiro and Aiko can trust.

It's a secondary plot element that steals the show: a Gothic Lolita type out for revenge on Aiko (who stole her boyfriend), who wields comically oversized scissors. Why that's her weapon of choice is never addressed, but the ensuing face-offs are entertaining – and mercifully tame compared to the splatter films that would follow (like *The Machine Girl* and *Tokyo Gore Police*).

▶ **Extras** Director Kenta Fukasaku discusses his desire to make horror that “puts a smile on your face” (21 minutes). *Tokyoscope* author Patrick Macias's commentary is meticulous well-prepared. This Treasury Films release also has two video essays: one (16 minutes) discusses how *X-Cross* was a turning point in the move from “vengeful ghost” J-horror to “girls with gore”; the other (13 minutes) lists scissor attack scenes. Plus: gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

“We'll be fine, I'm a trained lawman, you know.”



## SLITHER

A case of the brain worms

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 1 JUNE**

2006 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray/digital

▶ Director James Gunn

▶ Cast Michael Rooker, Nathan Fillion, Elizabeth Banks, Tania Saulnier

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** Before he became

one of Hollywood's most important producers, James Gunn made this self-consciously schlocky horror comedy.

An asteroid brings a parasitic alien species to Earth, which quickly burrows its way into Michael Rooker's Grant, causing him to mutate into a monster with an insatiable appetite. Police chief Bill Pardy (Nathan Fillion) and Grant's wife Starla (Elizabeth Banks) may offer the only hope of stopping the beast.

It's a gloopy, gruesome B-movie throwback, but Gunn's trademark humour and needle drops are already in place, and it still has a lot of charm.

“It's a gloopy, gruesome B-movie throwback”

▶ **Extras** This Visions Home Video edition offers four new interviews and tons of archival material. Composer Tyler Bates (15 minutes) reflects on the film's score, which was one of the first to make use of remote recording technology – where the orchestra was on the other side of the world.

Special make-up effects designer Todd Masters (12 minutes) discusses the development of the various alien creatures. Editor John Axelrad (13 minutes) talks shaping the film's final cut with Gunn, while DoP Gregory Middleton (17 minutes) discusses the film's retro look.

With the exception of 2017 *Making Of “The Genesis Of Slither”* (30 minutes), the archival material comes from the golden age of the DVD. You get a short behind-the-scenes piece (10 minutes), another special effects feature (19 minutes), and a tour of the set (four minutes). There's also a lengthy selection of deleted scenes (17 minutes) and bloopers (eight minutes). The 4K Steelbook comes with a poster. **Will Salmon**

**i** The alien worms from *Slither* can be seen in Gunn's first *Guardians Of The Galaxy*, as exhibits in the Collector's museum.



## ARCADE

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1993 | 15 | Blu-ray

▶ Director Albert Pyun

▶ Cast Megan Ward, Peter Billingsley, John de Lancie, Sharon Farrell

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** With its VR

theme and fractals fixation, this sci-fi thriller from Charles Band's cheapjack Full Moon stable couldn't be more early '90s unless it was wearing plaid and had a pocket full of Pogs. *SFX* readers may whoop at the credits: John “Q” de Lancie! Seth “Oz” Green! David Goyer!

It feels like a splice of *Buffy* and *Tron*. Megan Ward is Julie, forced to enter the titular game when her boyfriend's sucked in; Green a slacker pal; de Lancie a corporate hype man.

Every beat is predictable, but the fact Julie lost her mom to suicide adds some heart. The VR sequences are the weak link. The budget wouldn't stretch to anything half-decent, and they never feel like something you'd play. Skateboarding around an empty dungeon? Thrills.

Somehow both this and the cornball dialogue (“Kiss reality goodbye!”) are endearing, though. They don't make 'em like this anymore. Probably for the best, but it means *Arcade* delivers a sweet hit of nostalgia.

▶ **Extras** 88 Films bring us five interviews (55 minutes). De Lancie recalls a set like “something your mom and dad put together”. We also hear from Daniel Schweiger, who “fixed” the film (the VR parts were even worse...), the voice of *Arcade*, the composer, and the DoP. Three commentaries here: Band and Ward, Schweiger, and 88's regular Full Moon experts. Plus: a 10-minute promo; trailers; poster. **Ian Berriman**

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## THE NIGHTCOMERS

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1971 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director **Michael Winner**

▶ Cast **Marlon Brando,**

**Stephanie Beacham, Thora Hird**

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** This “*The Turn Of The Screw*” prequel reveals the nature of the relationship between governess Miss Jessel and gardener Peter Quint – ghosts in Henry James’s 1898 novella – and how they died.

The revelation that Jessel (Stephanie Beacham) and Quint (Marlon Brando) had a sado-masochistic dynamic makes for scenes unusual in period drama, but feels like TMI or provocation for shock value – especially once children Miles and Flora start imitating spied-on bondage sessions.

Brando’s performance is self-indulgent, crammed with “business”, and his Oirish accent prompts guffaws. The role demands malign charisma, but this Quint is a slovenly bore.

The film is bleakly chilling when it enters “psycho kids” territory. But its failure to dovetail with the original text (the timeline doesn’t match) is confounding.

▶ **Extras** The highlight of this Studiocanal release is a featurette interviewing five of the crew (29 minutes). The consensus is that Brando was egalitarian and egoless – unlike director Michael Winner...

A wry Kim Newman talking head (19 minutes) provides context. Kat Ellinger’s video essay (19 minutes) dashes through six versions of James’s tale. Her “deep analysis” commentary is tediously long-winded; a second critical track is better. Plus: trailers; four art cards. **Ian Berriman**



## WEREWOLF WOMAN

Mad donna

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

1976 | 18 | Blu-ray

▶ Director **Rino Di Silvestro**

▶ Cast **Annik Borel, Frederick Stafford, Dagmar Lassander, Tino Carraro**

**BLU-RAY DEBUT** More horny than hairy, this typically sleazy offering by director Rino Di Silvestro is apparently one of only two Italian werewolf flicks – but, strictly speaking, it isn’t about a werewolf.

A medieval opening scene sees a woman who looks like she’s been covered in glue then rolled on a barber’s floor hunted by torch-wielding peasants. But it’s only a dream of the traumatised Daniella (Annik Borel). Obsessed by the resemblance to an ancestor, her lycanthropy is a mental condition.

Featuring much throat-biting, voyeurism, and enough vulval close-ups to make Jess Franco flush, the film moves through numerous phases, with Daniella confined to an asylum, going on the lam, settling down, then being gang-raped in a home invasion. Initially you assume reincarnation will drive the plot, but that’s long forgotten by the time it settles into a rape-revenge groove.

Borel is impressively demented, giving it her all. It’s a trashy slice of sexploitation, but never drags, making for a camp guilty pleasure. ▶ **Extras** Treasured Films provide a choice of Italian language or English dub. Stephen Thrower’s astute overview (42 minutes), sensibly doesn’t take the film too seriously. Actor “Howard Ross” (aka Renato Rossini) charms in an interview (15 minutes) and a Q&A (41 minutes). The former reveals how the director had his pet iguana on set; in the latter, he greets the audience with a song!

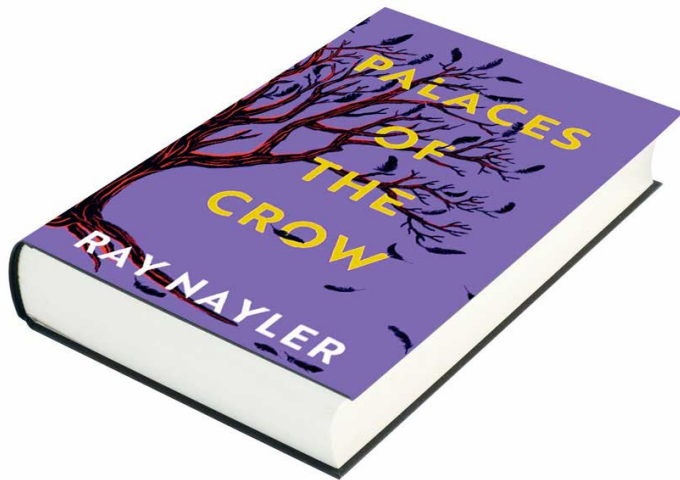
A piece on co-star Dagmar Lassander’s career (19 minutes) turns into an extended diss of her “inexpressive face”. A catalogue of supernatural females in Italian horror (29 minutes) is exhaustive... and exhausting. Two pairs of critics provide commentary: Kim Newman and David Flint; Eugenio Ercolani and Troy Howarth. The director is a tad grandiose in an old interview (10 minutes), as if convinced he crafted something profound... Plus: gallery; trailer; booklet; six art cards. **Ian Berriman**

**i** According to Renato Rossini, if the director’s pet iguana stuck its tongue out, he took that as a sign the scene was good!

## (ROUND UP)



The biggest of the recent movies now hitting shiny disc is **AVATAR: FIRE AND ASH** (1 June, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD). James Cameron’s third visit to Pandora introduces a new villain in Varang, leader of a Na’vi clan with a grudge against the moon’s mother goddess. We said: “Cameron has pulled out all the stops with a series of set-pieces that continually boggle the eyes... It’s almost enough to make us overlook the dreadful dialogue.” Bonuses include 13 behind-the-scenes featurettes, a tribute to late producer Jon Landau, and “RDA orientation videos”. Maggie Gyllenhaal’s punky, ‘30s-set riff on *Frankenstein*, **THE BRIDE!** (18 May, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), sees the lonely creature reviving Jessie Buckley’s dead escort for companionship. After a violent confrontation, they must go on the run. We said: “A film that crashes the party, sticks it to the Man, becomes ungovernable.” Extras: four featurettes (totalling 31 minutes). In Gore Verbinski’s **GOOD LUCK, HAVE FUN, DON’T DIE** (1 June, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) Sam Rockwell plays a man from a post-apocalyptic future, who must recruit restaurant patrons to help save humanity. We said: “A raucously watchable sci-fi comedy.” Extras: just a five-minute EPK piece. Finally, **THE STRANGERS – CHAPTER 3** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) wraps up Renny Harlin’s revival of the horror franchise about a trio of masked home invaders. “Final Girl” Maya is offered a place in their now-depleted ranks... and forcefully declines. We said: “Pedestrian and banal”, with “arbitrary plotting and a listless pay-off”. Ouch!



## PALACES OF THE CROW

Taken under corvine wings



★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 21 MAY**

384 pages | Hardback/ebook

▶ Author **Ray Nayler**

▶ Publisher **Weidenfeld & Nicolson**

☛ **Time is not as linear as we pretend.** Throughout our lives, there are moments when we look back to our younger selves and see the people we used to be anew. But whatever we make of ourselves, there are points in the past that, for reasons good and bad, are vivid, and to which we inevitably return. Ray Nayler's latest novel covers one such time in the lives of four young people whose lives are smashed apart by the brutality of the Second World War.

When they first meet, they have little in common. Neriya is a Jewish girl with ambitions to be a scientist, a teacher. Czeslaw, all guts, determination and will to survive, is a leader, for all that he's a deserter from the Red Army. Kezia is a Roma horse trader, someone of high emotional intelligence. A nameless boy who never speaks represents longing

and loss, but also the possibility of survival from trauma.

And survival is, of necessity, the quartet's priority as they retreat into the forest in Lithuania in 1941. The Germans have launched an invasion east, and hiding holds out the promise of safety. The forest offers shelter. There's food too, for those prepared to forage and hunt.

But as anyone who's ever read a fairy tale knows, monsters stalk the woods, which in 1941 means a hotchpotch of genocidal Nazis, ragged Red Army veterans and partisan guerrillas. Then there are those who have lost themselves to madness. Or, as the book has it, maybe the most frightening thing about werewolves is that they transform into humans.

How can four children survive in such an environment? The SF conceit in what's also a historical novel is that crows come to the aid of the four. And not just ordinary crows, who are anyway bright birds, but super-smart corvids in the process of – it's probably not too much of a spoiler to reveal – building a kind of urban

civilisation. Possibly becoming the crows other crows hate for being snooty, metropolitan and drinking chai lattes...

Beyond having once experienced kindness at human hands, it's never entirely clear why the birds protect the youngsters, warning them of approaching danger. Maybe the crows feel beholden to humans in some way. Maybe, with their opposable thumbs and ability to do tasks that don't come easily to those with wings, some tame humans are useful to have around.

Maybe the crows see how vulnerable the youngsters are and they are moved. Maybe crows like to keep pets. This ambiguity is the point; a way to understand that the crows have an alien intelligence. They share our world, but they don't see it as we do.

As the novel progresses, the quartet gradually retreat further and further into the woods but, in a parallel narrative that begins in 1971, we also learn what happened

“This is an extraordinary SF novel”

to them. With certain caveats, each becomes more themselves as they grow older – not necessarily a good thing in one case. And yet their shared experience also means they have become forever a family, closer than a family even; their own mini-civilisation that's as strange and inexplicable in its way as a city built by crows.

Throughout, Nayler relates this story with a lack of fuss and flourishes. This is not a criticism, because this is an extraordinary science fiction novel that deftly deals with the nature of consciousness, but where extraneous detail has been pared back. In the heart of the forest that Nayler shows us, there is darkness and death, but also dappled light, hope and the possibility of moving through a world where the prize for going on is that we live to see new wonders that would delight our younger selves. **Jonathan Wright**

**i** The multilingual Nayler prefers to read in Spanish or Russian. “Because you have to work, it's so much more exciting,” he says.



## THE MISTRAL

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

470 pages | Hardback/ebook/

audiobook

▶ Author **Felix Mosse**

▶ Publisher **Penguin Michael Joseph**

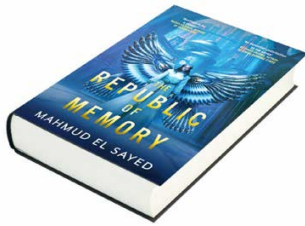
☛ **If there's one obvious touchstone for Felix Mosse's epic fantasy debut, it's not another novel but the *Final Fantasy* videogames.** His story is set in a world where magic is powered by the titular Mistral, a mystical wind which bestows fantastic abilities called Roots upon the chosen few. There's a prophecy waiting to be fulfilled about the return of the Four Mythic Roots and rival kingdoms – Terrius and Eron – struggling to end years of war.

In Eron, Fenne is a fighter in the Iron Circuit, an arena where the Root-blessed can test their skills, while Swan is the heir to the throne of Terrius, although true power lies in the hands of the matriarchal church. The conflict between the two nations stems from the murder of Swan's mother, a death that Terrius blames on Eron, despite never having identified the assassin.

Mosse puts his world-building front and centre, detailing everything from trade to politics. This leads to some unwieldy exposition dumps in the first half of the book. Despite that, the magic system remains obtuse, the inclusion of dragons seems superfluous, and it's not always clear whose story Mosse wants to tell.

Fortunately, the pace picks up in the second half when he starts weaving the disparate plot threads together, but at times it can be hard to see the narrative wood for the trees.

**David West**



## THE REPUBLIC OF MEMORY

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

496 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

▶ Author Mahmud El Sayed

▶ Publisher Gollancz

☛ **The starship Safina** is journeying from Earth towards a new home. In stasis are survivors of the home planet's Network Empire. To stay alive, these "ancestors" need the good will of the crew, their descendants. But how much do those living in the unfolding present owe to those who left only desolation in their wake?

It's a question that, in British-Egyptian novelist Mahmud El Sayed's arabyfuturist debut, animates a diverse cast of characters. They range from Iskander, a "translator", whose often thankless role is to "liaise between General Crew and Administration", to Hilal, an ancestor warrior.

Hilal's waking presence is out of necessity, down to the glitchy ship suddenly losing power. Soon, it becomes clear that Safina was sabotaged. In a novel influenced by events during the Arab Spring, revolution is stirring.

At times, in a sprawling volume told from multiple perspectives, this central story gets lost. The use of different dialects, notably the street slang of "Nupol", can be confusing too. But any difficulty this causes the reader is maybe part of the point in that the difficulty of communication between different groups is a central theme. An admirably ambitious novel that repays slow reading rather than rushing towards the next plot point. **Jonathan Wright**



## NOT WITH A BANG

### Kitchen sink apocalypse

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 21 MAY**

432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

▶ Author Temi Oh

▶ Publisher Solstice Books

☛ **It could be the end of the world** as we know it, and the Minton family are anything but fine. For one thing, it has ruined their eldest daughter's wedding. Because a comet due to make a close pass of Earth suddenly changes direction, resulting in a magnetic upheaval – with anything containing metal momentarily heading skywards – that leaves our planet devastated.

*Not With A Bang* is the third book from Temi Oh, who is fast building an estimable reputation in SF circles. Here, she delivers a book that feels like one of John Wyndham's cosy catastrophes given a contemporary twist for a culturally very different Britain, with a bit of US post-apocalyptic TV series vibe (*The Leftovers*, *Station Eleven*) thrown in.

The story relates the events from the point of view of the

Minton family: dad Marcus, a disgraced cop turned survivalist who has built a bunker in the garden; mum Kim, who has cancer; and their four mixed-race daughters, Aaliyah, Briar, Tanice and Chantale. The magnetic burp happens with the family split across London, and they spend much of the novel trying to reunite in the ensuing chaos. Except Briar, who runs off to join a UFO cult.

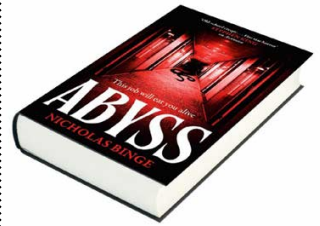
Their various journeys reveal the murky, complicated pasts of the Minton clan. For a long while, you do wonder if any of the sci-fi elements will remain unexplained. Ultimately, they *are* explained (and very satisfactorily so), but you probably wouldn't mind if they weren't, because the various characters' storylines are so absorbing.

The only mild irritation is the choice of a first-person viewpoint, with Briar as narrator. It works well to personalise the events, but with chapters flitting between characters, the excuse that (to paraphrase) "I learned this all later" occasionally draws attention to the artificiality of the technique. Overall though, this is a banger.

**Dave Golder**

**i** Temi Oh wrote "The Last Of The Dals", a short story featuring Davros, for the *Doctor Who* anthology *Origin Stories*.

“Feels like one of John Wyndham's cosy catastrophes”



## ABYSS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

160 pages | Hardback/ebook/

audiobook

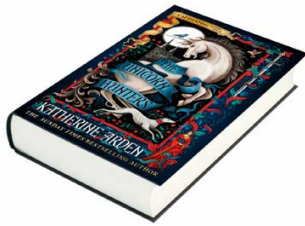
▶ Author Nicholas Binge

▶ Publisher Tor Nightfire

☛ **Corporate life is hell in this** bleakly witty SF horror novella. *Abyss* follows Joseph Rice, an Instagram-addicted everyman who is riddled with anxiety and grappling with a troubled relationship with his mother. Having recently lost a job in PR, he glumly takes a vague new role at a mysterious company named Ponos. Things quickly take a strange turn: he finds himself in a mostly deserted and seemingly endless office with cryptic instructions and an intrusive app monitoring his every move. When he does finally meet other people, the mystery only gets deeper and darker, especially once he discovers that none of them can leave.

Any liminal horror set in an office is going to draw comparisons to *Severance* right now, and there are also echoes of both *There Is No Antimemetics Division* by qntm and Ben Pester's recent *The Expansion Project* here. *Abyss* is as atmospheric and eerie as those titles, but where author Nicholas Binge really excels is in cutting to the chase: this is a propulsive and exciting thriller, as well as a pointed critique of corporate wellness initiatives, surveillance capitalism and the convenience at any cost seemingly offered by AI. *Abyss* is sledgehammer subtle with its themes, but a current of palpable anger at its heart makes for a compelling and haunting read.

**Will Salmon**



## THE UNICORN HUNTERS

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 2 JUNE**

425 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

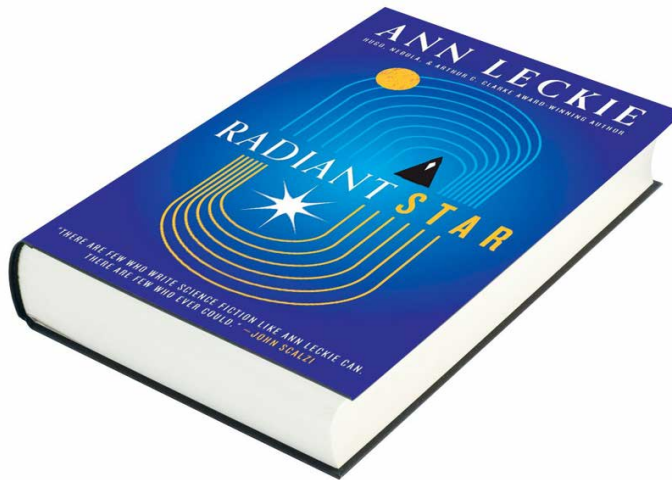
▶ Author **Katherine Arden**

▶ Publisher **Century**

☞ **One of the beauties of fiction** is the ability to imagine a “What if?”. What ifs of aliens and wizards, sure, but also: what if the bad guys didn’t always have to win? What if women could control their own destiny? What if a young girl forced into a life not of her choosing had found a way to make her own decisions?

This novel tackles exactly that, reimagining the life of the real fifteenth-century duchess Anne of Brittany into one where magic and sorcery could come to her aid and allow her to keep her duchy’s independence. After Brittany’s defeat by France, Anne is due to marry the French king; seeking to delay the wedding, she proposes a unicorn hunt in the enchanted forest of Brocéliande. It’s meant to be a ruse, but then a unicorn *does* appear to her, followed by a man who first walked in there 200 years previously...

It’s a fascinating story of political intrigue, folklore and fairy tale, that’s at its strongest when Anne wrestles with the real-world implications of her movements. The plot suffers slightly as the action moves away from this into the “lost lands”, full of magic and sorcery. But at its core it’s the story of a young woman, told since birth that her body is only a vessel for men of power, who stands tall to reclaim both her self and lands. **Rhian Drinkwater**



## RADIANT STAR

### Losing Their Religion

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

368 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

▶ Author **Ann Leckie**

▶ Publisher **Orbit Books**

☞ **Ann Leckie returns to the universe** of her multi-award-winning Imperial Radch trilogy with this new standalone. Although prior knowledge is by no means essential, the opening quarter of *Radiant Star* still feels like heavy going as you absorb the complex history and customs of a planet named Aaa.

The novel is centred on the city of Ooioiaa, where “annexing” Radchaai forces have established their base of operations. While they’d prefer to enforce a single belief system across their entire galactic empire, the Radch grudgingly accept that keeping the populace in line requires making some concessions to the local religion. So they agree to allow an ageing corporate mogul to be mummified and immortalised as a saint – until a series of unforeseen events (including a food crisis in the city) put the occupiers on the back foot.

“**Makes clever (and subtle) use of language**”

This is an ambitious, sprawling book, built around a dauntingly large cast of characters who straddle every tier of Aaa society: from an AI consciousness controlling a Radchaai ship in orbit, to a servant who learns he’s destined for something more, via various religious, military and business leaders.

An anonymous narrator pulls the disparate threads together, often talking directly to the reader as they provide context for the planet’s political machinations. Leckie also makes clever (and subtle) use of language to flesh out her world, most notably with the many pronouns she creates to represent the multiple genders of Aaa.

And despite the diamond-hard SF setting, this universe is remarkably relatable, the ideal backdrop for familiar, topical themes of class, religion and imperialism. The problem is, the book’s world-building is rather more impressive than its narrative. Viewed as a history of another world, *Radiant Star* is undeniably impressive. Sadly, it also feels a little too much like homework to truly fly as a novel.

**Richard Edwards**

**i** The audiobook version of *Radiant Star* is read by actor Adjoa Andoh, who played Martha Jones’s mum in *Doctor Who*.



## LEAP OF EIGHTH

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

267 pages | Paperback

▶ Author **Reecy Pontiff**

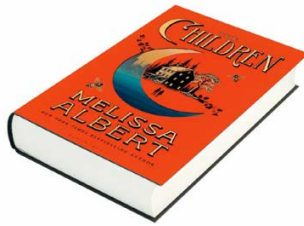
▶ Publisher **Telos Publishing**

☞ **It’s been 30 years since the Eighth Doctor** made his debut in the 1996 TV movie, and while his time on screen was all too short, his adventures across other media have developed him into a uniquely rich and complex incarnation. *Leap Of Eighth* is a long overdue deep dive into the story behind his stories, with Reecy Pontiff finally weaving together the McGann Doctor’s various timelines into a single, entertaining account.

Exclusive interviews with nearly 60 creators who helped to shape the Eighth Doctor – including TV movie producer Philip Segal, Steven Moffat and Paul McGann himself – form the bedrock of the book.

These fascinating insights span every facet of his canon, giving context to everything from the *Radio Times* comic strip through to 2024’s stage performances of Big Finish audio drama *The Stuff Of Legend*. It’s something of a celebratory birthday present to the character, but there are also plenty of frank behind-the-scenes revelations that will surprise even the most well-versed of Eighth Doctor obsessives.

Much like John Higgs’s book *Exterminate/Regenerate*, *Leap Of Eighth* manages to probe multiple corners of the Whoniverse in a fun and accessible way. Grace, Charley and Izzy better watch out; this could well be the definitive companion to the Eighth Doctor. **Dom Carter**



## THE CHILDREN

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 4 JUNE**

416 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author **Melissa Albert**

► Publisher **Bloomsbury**

◉ **Learning that the creator of your childhood dreams had feet of clay is something of a rite of passage these days.** How much worse, though, if that creator is your own mother, and everyone else still thinks she's the bee's knees?

For half a decade of their childhood, Guinevere and Ennis grew up in the bucolic, bohemian Farmhouse, deep in the woods of rural Vermont. Their father was a good actor turned bad painter, and their mother wrote a wildly popular series of children's fantasy novels, using her kids as main characters. Twenty years after a devastating fire tore the family apart, Guin is the studiously cheerful promoter of her late mother's legacy, while the estranged Ennis lurks just off-stage, creating uncanny art and getting called "troubled" a lot in the press.

The novel flits between the two timeframes, making a mystery both of the past, and of what Ennis plans in the present. Melissa Albert crafts a near-suffocating sense of dread through evocative detail (ripe fruit has never been this sinister...) and unsettling glimpses of the possibly supernatural.

The big reveal can't match the build up – the execution wobbles, direct explanation proving less satisfying than hints – but this darkest of fairy tales ends on a note of shiver-inducing horror.

**Nic Clarke**



## SARAFINA

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

354 pages | Paperback

► Author **Philip Fracassi**

► Publisher **Black Crow Books**

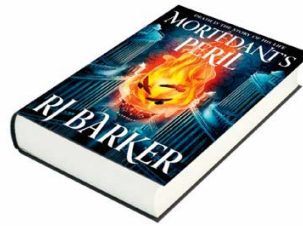
◉ **The thing about stories is** you almost inevitably take the side of the person telling them. But Philip Fracassi's supernatural American Civil War horror will really test your sympathies.

Ethan Belle is just 17 years old when he heads off to fight in the Confederate army alongside his two older brothers. War is hell, of course, so the three of them go AWOL. After weeks on the run – exhausted, injured, hopeless – they find refuge in the home of the titular Sarafina. Beautiful, hospitable and skilled at medicine, Sarafina is too good to be true – and before long, Ethan discovers that she has a terrifying agenda of her own.

There's lofty stuff in here about trauma and grief, but something doesn't quite click. The supernatural stuff sits oddly alongside the real-world nastiness, especially because almost every character is *horrible*: Confederacy issues aside, the elder Belle brothers are cruel, violent men, and Ethan himself is a deeply unreliable narrator. Sarafina might be scary, but it's hard not to feel like the Belles deserve what they get.

Except, of course, for the generational trauma, and the brutality of war, and the horrors no one should have to bear. It's a big tangle of morality, religion and politics, and while there are no easy answers, this book doesn't quite seem to know how to ask the questions.

Confounding. **Sarah Dobbs**



## MORTEDANT'S PERIL

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 21 MAY**

417 pages | Hardback/ebook/  
audiobook

► Author **RJ Barker**

► Publisher **Tor**

◉ **A new novel by RJ Barker is** always exciting. From naval adventures to fungus-powered rural epics, his series feature flawed protagonists battling bizarre ecosystems. Here, the setting has a tighter focus: this is a detective story, set in a city-state called Elbay, which has a whiff of *Gormenghast*. It brings to mind *Silo* too, with its vertical claustrophobia and forbidden lore.

It's a story about fanaticism and the corruption that comes from tradition. Irody Hasp is a down-on-his-luck Mortedant, licensed to read the thoughts of the deceased. When he probes the corpse of a low-level worker, he's drawn into a plot that leaves his apprentice murdered and himself framed. With three days to prove his innocence, Irody must venture into the city's dark heart.

Barker excels at making you care for unusual characters, with the stand-out hero emerging as Whisper, a sea creature who becomes Irody's custodian, minder and (ultimately) friend. Hapless and stumbling, he could pass for a Terry Pratchett creation.

*Mortedant's Peril* doesn't reach the heights of Barker's *Gods Of The Wyrdwood*. Nevertheless, the tale is fast and accessible, mixing sleuthing and scrapping. With its urban politicking, it should appeal to fans of James Logan's *The Silverblood Promise*. **Dave Bradley**

## REISSUES

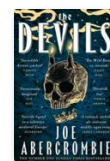
Our pick of the paperbacks is **WHEN THERE ARE WOLVES AGAIN** (★★★★, 4 June, Arcadia). EJ Swift's novel sees two women



looking back, from the year 2070, on their roles in the fight to restore depleted

natural habitats via rewilding: Lucy doing so as an activist, and Hester as a documentary filmmaker. We said:

"Swift's exquisite writing brings urgent, pungent life to everything from soil to sky, and she also confronts the human costs of change." *My Fair Lady*



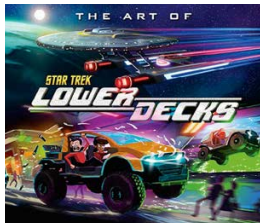
meets *The Suicide Squad* in **THE DEVILS** (★★★★, 28 May, Gollancz), the first

volume of Joe Abercrombie's new fantasy series. Its protagonist is street urchin/petty thief Alex, who discovers that she's the heir to the Serpent Throne of Troy, then in order to claim the throne must travel across Europe, navigating assassination attempts and local wars in the process. We said: "Abercrombie sets a brisk pace, dropping readers into the thick of it

... his prose is always engaging and energetic." Finally, Catherine Chidgey's eerie coming

of age tale **THE BOOK OF GUILT** (★★★★, 21 May, John Murray) is set in an alternate England in 1979, and centres on triplets living at a care home for "Sycamore Children", who are fed medicine to protect them from a bug, and have their nightmares monitored and recorded. We said: "Haunting and strange... hides menace beneath its layers of '70s nostalgia."

## BULLET TIME A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



## THE ART OF STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS

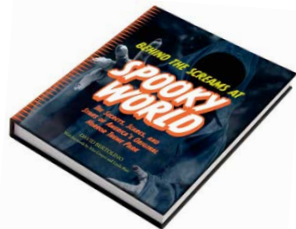
▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

348 pages | Hardback/ebook

▶ Author Megan Treviño

▶ Publisher IDW Publishing

- A gorgeous image-packed, words-light coffee table book on the art of the *Trek* series that relied on art the most.
- Pre-production sketches, backgrounds, ships, "props", characters... it covers everything seen (and sometimes not seen) on the show.
- It goes through the main characters (including oodles of rejected designs, such as Shaxs as a koala alien), then through every episode in order.
- There's also an absurdly detailed set of maps (from different projections) of the USS *Cerritos*.
- Many of the images have original notes on them ("Change hair", "Shorten fingers"), which are quite fascinating.
- May reveal Easter eggs you hadn't spotted.
- An amazing testament to the outstanding work (and geekery) of the artists on the series.



## BEHIND THE SCREAMS AT SPOOKYWORLD

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 28 MAY**

256 pages | Hardback/ebook

▶ Author David Bertolino

▶ Publisher Castle Books

◉ Halloween "scream parks", or haunt attractions, are a multi-billion dollar industry, and the crossover is such that there's now a plethora of them throughout the UK. But where did it all begin? Why, on a US haunted hayride back in 1990. It was here that "hauntrepreneur" David Bertolino got his inspiration to take the idea and make it something... bigger.

That's an understatement: Spookyworld, his haunted theme park, was a game-changer for Halloween celebrations, running for 12 years and spawning numerous imitations globally. It was also a precursor for the wider celebration of pop culture, as Bertolino opened his gates to celebrities outside the world of autograph signings.

As much as this is the story of how Bertolino unwittingly started a global phenomenon, it's also a fascinating read about the changing face of fandom in the '90s and early '00s and business in general. There's genuine excitement as the success story unfolds.

Spookyworld closed for a second time in 2003 – it lives on as part of another attraction – but this lavishly illustrated history only touches on failures when it has to. It's an absorbing account of a turning point in understanding the power of fandom. **Darren Scott**



## THE MANY

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

304 pages | Paperback/ebook/  
audiobook

▶ Author Sylvain Neuvel

▶ Publisher Solaris

◉ There's really no way to avoid the Apple TV-branded elephant in this particular room: an outer-space pathogen is biologically transforming humanity into a smiling, harmonious hivemind. Yes, *The Many* has been gazumped by *Pluribus*. And unfortunately Sylvain Neuvel's novel suffers by comparison.

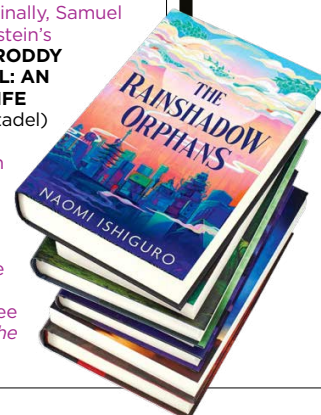
The two tales aren't identical: here, point-of-view duties are shared between infected and non-infected, and the mode of transmission is through contact with infected blood, making it more like a benign zombie apocalypse.

Furthermore, in the best strand of the novel, Neuvel's telepathic love-in also absorbs the non-human world, giving us a nifty little chapter about a giraffe discovering dancing, and a very funny running joke about how one specific cat influences the hivemind.

But most of the page count focuses on a handful of people in a single small US town, and the high concept's implications are gestured at rather than explored. There's some brief handwringing about consent before our infected protagonists return to assimilating their neighbours with chompy abandon; inconvenient traits like racism are washed away in telepathic joy. Weirdest of all, the first three converts bonk like bunnies, until they're joined by an 11-year-old child and their sex drive is never mentioned again. **Nic Clarke**

## ALSO OUT

As ever, there are plenty more books we couldn't fit in. Naomi Ishiguro's whimsical, Studio Ghibli-inspired fantasy **THE RAINSHADOW ORPHANS** (28 May, Solstice Books) is set in an archipelago brimming with dragons and Sun Spirits, high-tech hackers and bubble tea, and centres on the theft of a magical pearl from the leader of an underground crime group. Kim Newman has somehow found time in-between recording Blu-ray bonus interviews to write another novel. Set in an alternative London, **MODEL ACTRESS WHATEVER** (out now, Titan) follows a soap opera actress who, on discovering her character's about to be killed off, stops dieting, unlocking previously untapped abilities. Grethen McNeil's feminist horror **THEY FEAR NOT MEN IN THE WOODS** (26 May, Black Crow) draws on Scandinavian folklore as it relates the tale of a woman who returns to her hometown after the remains of her forest ranger father are found, determined to find out what really happened to him. Naturally this involves a camping trip into the woods, where something dreadful lurks... Shannon Chakraborty's latest, **THE TAPESTRY OF FATE** (out now, HarperVoyager), continues the swashbuckling adventures of pirate Amina Al-Siafri, as she's tasked with stealing a spindle capable of rewriting fate from a mysterious sorceress's island lair. Finally, Samuel Garza Bernstein's biography **RODDY MCDOWALL: AN ACTOR'S LIFE** (26 May, Citadel) turns the spotlight on the actor perhaps best known for playing chimpanzee Cornelius in the first three *Planet Of The Apes* films.





# Temi Oh

The novelist/screenwriter is an expert at shouting in nightclubs



STUDIO DATURA

**Describe the room in which you typically write.**

▶ I live in London, so for the past couple of years my “office” has been a cupboard under the stairs. I’m quite proud of how pretty I’ve made such a small space. Imagine maximalist floral wallpaper, twinkly strip lights, silk peonies and wax succulents, and an upholstered pink velvet swivel chair. Imagine the dressing room of a Broadway singer squeezed into the cockpit of a space shuttle.

**Do you have any knick-knacks on your desk?**

▶ Quite a few. I have a finger puppet of Alexander Hamilton, a pencil sharpener with Rodin’s *The Thinker* cast in plastic, candy-coloured paper dolls of Marie Antoinette. The first time I went to YALC [the Young Adult Literature Convention], they let me keep the sign that read “Temi Oh”, which is the first thing you see when you open my office door.

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

▶ Mostly I prefer silence. There are albums I’ll fixate on for years while writing. I’ll go for runs while listening to them and think about my

characters. For *More Perfect*, it was *Hadestown*. For *Not With A Bang*, it was *Into The Woods*. During the later stages of editing *Do You Dream Of Terra-Two?* I’d listen to the *Hamilton* album from beginning to end. It’s two hours and 23 minutes, so I’d measure units of productivity in “Hamiltons”. On good days, I’d manage two. I’d berate myself if I only achieved half a Hamilton.

**Which of your books was the most difficult to write?**

▶ *More Perfect*. I wish I knew why. It was the pandemic. It was my second novel. First novels come filled with their own kind of rocket fuel. In “The Rime Of The Ancient Mariner”, a “grey-beard loon” grabs a man on the way to

a wedding and lurches straight into telling a story – “There was a ship...” – without any preamble or introductions or apologies. Debut novels can be like that... a tale you’re compelled to tell. By contrast, I suffered from so many false starts and doubts with *More Perfect*.

**Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?**

▶ Mervyn Peake.

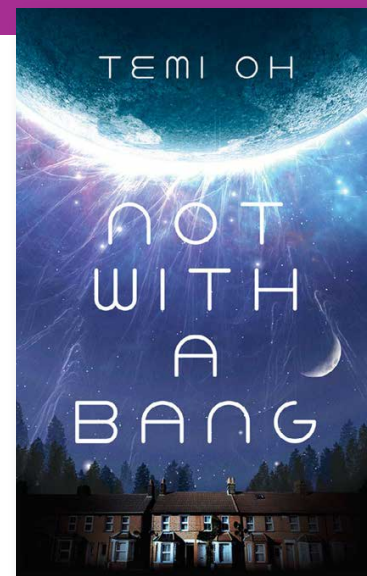
**Recommend one book that you love that’s not very well known.**

▶ I really loved *Fight Me* by Austin Grossman. It was such a perfect balance of playful and regretful, funny and melancholy.

**What’s the biggest misconception that people have about being a professional author?**

▶ After my second book was published, my colleagues in the office kept walking past my desk and saying, “Why do you still work here?” I think they thought I should be riding off to the Seychelles in my new yacht.

**“I’d berate myself if I only achieved half a Hamilton”**



**What’s the most frustrating thing about being a professional author?**

▶ If you’re in a nightclub and someone asks, “So, what do you do?” You’ll end up having to shout the plot of your latest novel into their ear. It’s unavoidable.

**What’s the best piece of writing advice you’ve received or read?**

▶ Kurt Vonnegut said, “Make your characters want something right away, even if it’s only a glass of water.” ☘

*Not With A Bang* by Temi Oh is out on 21 May, published in hardback by Solstice Books.



HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS VIA GETTY

## VERTIGO RELAUNCH

Call of the weird

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

- ▶ Publisher DC Vertigo
- ▶ Writers James Tynion IV, Deniz Camp, Chris Condon
- ▶ Artists Álvaro Martínez Bueno, Stipan Morian, Jacob Phillips

➔ The legendary “Mature Readers” imprint that rewrote the comics rule book in the ’90s, Vertigo was an immense success for DC, but eventually fell on hard times and was shut down in 2020, seemingly forever. Now the imprint is back with a roster of new titles, and while time will tell whether this relaunch actually works, DC is certainly giving it a very enthusiastic try.

We’ve already got James Tynion IV’s brilliant *The Nice House* saga. Its second 12-issue run miniseries,

**The Nice House On The Lake**

★★★★★ has shifted across from DC’s Black Label imprint, and is continuing to be a compulsively brilliant mix of science fiction and horror.

Added to this, we have three new Vertigo launches, showcasing a broad variety of styles and storytelling approaches. While the deeply offbeat hitman caper *End Of Life* slots into the crime genre (explored by the imprint’s previous titles like *100 Bullets* and *Scalped*), the other two are firmly in classic Vertigo mode, going for grisly cartoony horror and dark pulp adventure.

**Bleeding Hearts** ★★★★★ sees *Ultimates* writer Deniz Camp taking zombies in a much weirder and more satirical direction. Here,

we’re in a bleak world where the zombie apocalypse has almost exterminated all other life, and the zombies themselves have developed their own bizarre form of society.

However, when an oddball zombie named Poke decides to save a pair of human survivors, the status quo is upended. The result is a fun and frequently grotesque horror adventure that has great art from Stipan Morian, even if its first three issues haven’t quite fully kicked the story into gear.

More immediately compelling is **The Peril Of The Brutal Dark** ★★★★★, a thoroughly entertaining ’40s-set pulp fantasy adventure from writer Chris Condon and artist Jacob Phillips. This six-issue miniseries (with



**D'ORC**



★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

- ▶ Publisher Image Comics
- ▶ Writer/artist Brett Bean

**ISSUES 1-3** This endearing fantasy series is a welcome throwback. Enhanced by Jean-Francois Beaulieu’s vibrant colours, writer/artist Brett Bean’s sinewy, cartoony artwork embodies the spirit of classic ’70s artists such as Mike Ploog and Vaughn Bodé, while the tale of the titular half-dwarf half-orc brings to mind Ralph Bakshi’s 1978 animated adaptation of *The Lord Of The Rings* – as well as Dan Abnett and Richard Elson’s equally offbeat *2000 AD* series “Feral & Foe”.

Teaming D’Orc – who resembles a crazed Kermit – with a talking magical Death Shield and a ghostly chicken head and its headless body, Bean’s tongue is never far from his cheek initially as he emphasises bonkers, gross-out humour, leavened with the occasional burst of bloody violence. He also chucks a Timelord (not the *Doctor Who* kind) and his young Time Thieves into the heady, *Time Bandits*-esque mix.

Opening each issue with a handy map of the mythical lands of Sunderaine, Bean has great fun skewering all the archetypal fantasy tropes. However, the plot starts getting serious by issue three, as the forces of Light and Darkness send dwarf assassin Gloinspear – who resembles a rabid Gimli – to eliminate D’Orc, who is destined to be their doom. You’d be a dork not to join this merry fellowship on their travels.

Stephen Jewell



“Now the imprint is back with a roster of new titles”

more hopefully to come) pitches battered private eye Ezra Cain into a tangled web that involves a secretive cult and Greek mythology. Three issues in, this is already a well-crafted noir thriller that avoids feeling like an empty pastiche, while also giving us an engagingly flawed protagonist.

Among the six Vertigo titles still to come later in 2026, promising highlights include *Black Tower: The Raven Conspiracy*, a magical espionage thriller, and *Necretaceous*, a lurid mix of time travel, zombies and dinosaurs.

It’ll be interesting to see how successful and long-lasting these titles will ultimately be – but so far, Vertigo’s new era is definitely off to an intriguing and attention-grabbing start.

Saxon Bullock

i Chris Condon also has a new miniseries from Image Comics: intriguing eco-horror tale *Of The Earth*. Issue one’s out 20 May.



## HULK: SMASH EVERYTHING

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher **Marvel Comics**

▶ Writer **Ryan North**

▶ Artist **Vincenzo Carratú**

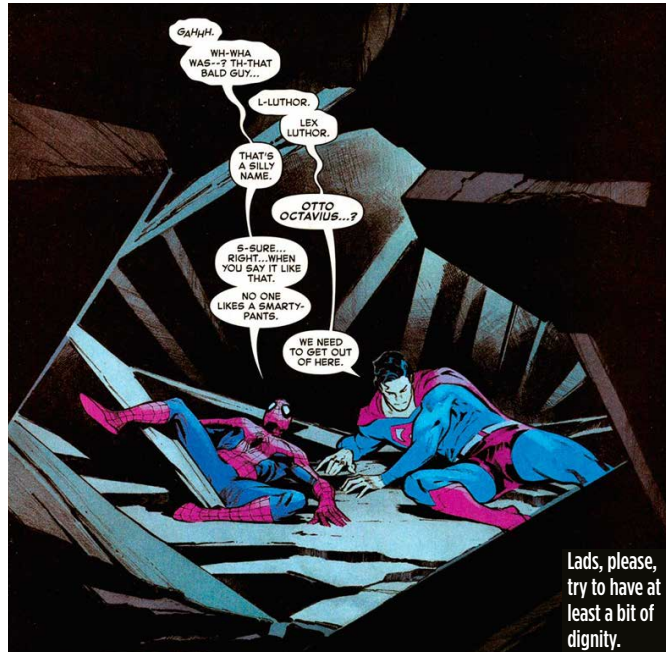
**ISSUES 1-5** Sometimes, it's okay for superhero comics to be unapologetically dumb – like this latest five-issue miniseries, which takes an out-of-continuity approach to the question “What if the Hulk genuinely tried to smash everything?”

The basic set-up is that when a plan by the villainous Leader to exploit the Hulk's rage backfires, the green goliath ends up catapulted across time into ever-more extreme scenarios, as his unstoppable rage just keeps on growing.

It's a rampantly silly slice of over-the-top action that gets exhausting at times, but wins points for its splendidly weird plot twists, whether it's Hulk almost wrecking human history, or getting into a fist-fight with Galactus. Ryan North's script keeps the pace brisk and also pulls off some bold tonal shifts – most notably in the story's best sequence, where Hulk is thrown into a black hole and ends up having to punch his way out!

Vincenzo Carratú's art veers from workmanlike to genuinely bizarre, packing plenty of kinetic energy into the action sequences while also enhancing some of the story's more compellingly bizarre moments.

Not everyone's going to be on board for this, but those willing to meet this miniseries on its own terms will find it creative and lurid enough to forgive its excesses. **Saxon Bullock**



Lads, please, try to have at least a bit of dignity.

## SPIDER-MAN/ SUPERMAN

Does whatever a Kryptonian can

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Publisher **Marvel Comics**

▶ Writers/artists **Various**

**ONE-SHOT** It's “phase two” time for the latest burst of DC/Marvel crossovers, and this Marvel-produced take on a Spidey/Superman team-up is a lot of fun, even if it doesn't quite reach the heights of DC's matching special.

The main story of this oversized issue takes a similar approach to DC's *Superman/Spider-Man*, this time pitching the titular heroes against both Lex Luthor and the Green Goblin. However, while there are some well-played moments of action, the script from *Identity Crisis*'s Brad Meltzer plays more as an emotional character piece. The end result is heartwarming, and is buoyed by Pepe Larraz's excellent artwork, but lacks the pulpy joy of Mark Waid and Jorge Jimenez's main story from the previous special.

Elsewhere, we have another collection of back-up tales that adds up to a typically mixed bag, but one where even the lesser stories count as “pretty good”.

A firm highlight is Dan Slott and Marcos Martin's “Metropolis Marvels”, a 1940s team-up between Superman and the “Noir” Spider-Man which benefits hugely from Martin's wildly inventive artwork. There's also the Superman/Miles Morales crossover “The One Thing...”, which features engaging and characterful work from Miles's original creators, writer Brian Michael Bendis and artist Sara Pichelli.

Overall, it's an impressive haul of stories that complements the previous special (even if it doesn't quite beat it), and sets a good standard for any future Marvel/DC collaborations. **Saxon Bullock**

**i** All four issues of 2006's Marvel/DC crossover *JLA/Avengers* are being reprinted as facsimiles – #1 is out 27 May.



## NEW ADVENTURES FROM THE TRIGAN EMPIRE Book 1

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED 21 MAY**

▶ Publisher **Rebellion**

▶ Writer **Michael Carroll**

▶ Artist **Tom Foster**

**GRAPHIC NOVEL** Just how do you follow a legendary piece of British comics history? By dismantling it, perhaps.

Not that Michael Carroll and Tom Foster are out to tear down the reputation of *The Trigan Empire*, the sprawling, neo-classical space saga that ran for nearly 20 years in the pages of *Ranger* and *Look And Learn*. This graphic novel revival builds on rather than undermines the work of their predecessors. But cunningly it also questions the very foundations of the original.

A framing sequence sets up this intriguingly revisionist take: a new trove of chronicles are discovered in deep space, written by Janno, nephew of Trigo, founder of the Empire. Purporting to tell “the true history of my people”, faults and all, they advance the saga by a few decades, introducing a new generation of protagonists alongside the familiar heroes.

Carroll brings a distinct pinch of *Game Of Thrones* to the Trigans, layering in the palace intrigue. Foster's painted art feels looser than the work of Don Lawrence but has the requisite lushness, matching the romantic sweep of the story – and a climactic air battle delivers some especially memorable imagery.

A promising, provocative first instalment, full of imperial ambition. **Nick Setchfield**

## PRAGMATATA

Diddy Diana

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Reviewed on PC

▶ Also available on PS5, Xbox Series X|S, Nintendo Switch 2

▶ Publisher Capcom

**VIDEOGAME** Stop us if you've

heard this one before: when a lunar mining outpost goes dark, an investigation team finds themselves at odds with an army of cheesed-off bots.

*Resident Evil* creator Capcom trades zombies for rogue robots in this sci-fi shooter. Though you're still blasting shambling baddies, this jaunt across the moon's surface drops the emphasis on claustrophobic horror, offering a thoroughly modern twist on gunplay that wouldn't be caught dead in a creaky mansion.

Hugh Williams, the sole survivor of his ill-fated team, must

make his own way around the Delphi Corporation's moon base and secure a ride back to Earth. Thankfully, he's joined by Diana, a life-like "Pragmata" android.

This pint-sized droid perches upon your beardy protagonist's back, her hacking matrix displaying whenever you take aim with your sci-fi firearm of choice. "Hacking" sees you pressing buttons in order to weave your way through a grid of nodes that open up weak points for Hugh to shoot.

It's up to you how many bonuses you want Diana to activate, be it extra damage or status effects that can, say, cause your enemies to overheat. That makes hacks more complicated but it's all done simultaneously, making the action not unlike mastering the act of rubbing your belly and patting your head to play.

Add in the fact that you've still got to dodge enemy attacks, and you'd be forgiven for thinking it all sounds just a bit overwhelming. Make no mistake, late-game bust-ups can get hectic, especially as your arsenal grows, and later areas introduce environmental hazards you'll want to sidestep.

Bog-standard bots are, at least, mercifully slow (much like Capcom's shambling zombies), so while there's a lot to keep track of, having the twitchiest of reflexes is far from a must. Considering how fast-paced modern shooters can be, this is downright refreshing.

While gameplay gets full marks for novelty, the story plays it safe. The narrative pulls out all the stops to endear you to Diana – you can even play hide and seek with the diminutive droid. All the "robot child" beats are here, and genre fiends will see them coming from a lightyear away. But that doesn't mean you won't still feel a lump in your throat by the bittersweet end. **Jess Kinghorn**

**i** A ticker on an ad screen includes the URL [aweskerproduction.com](http://aweskerproduction.com). A website's now been set up by *Resident Evil* fans.



## WARHAMMER: SPEARHEAD – CITY OF ASH

★★★★★

▶ **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

▶ Players Two players

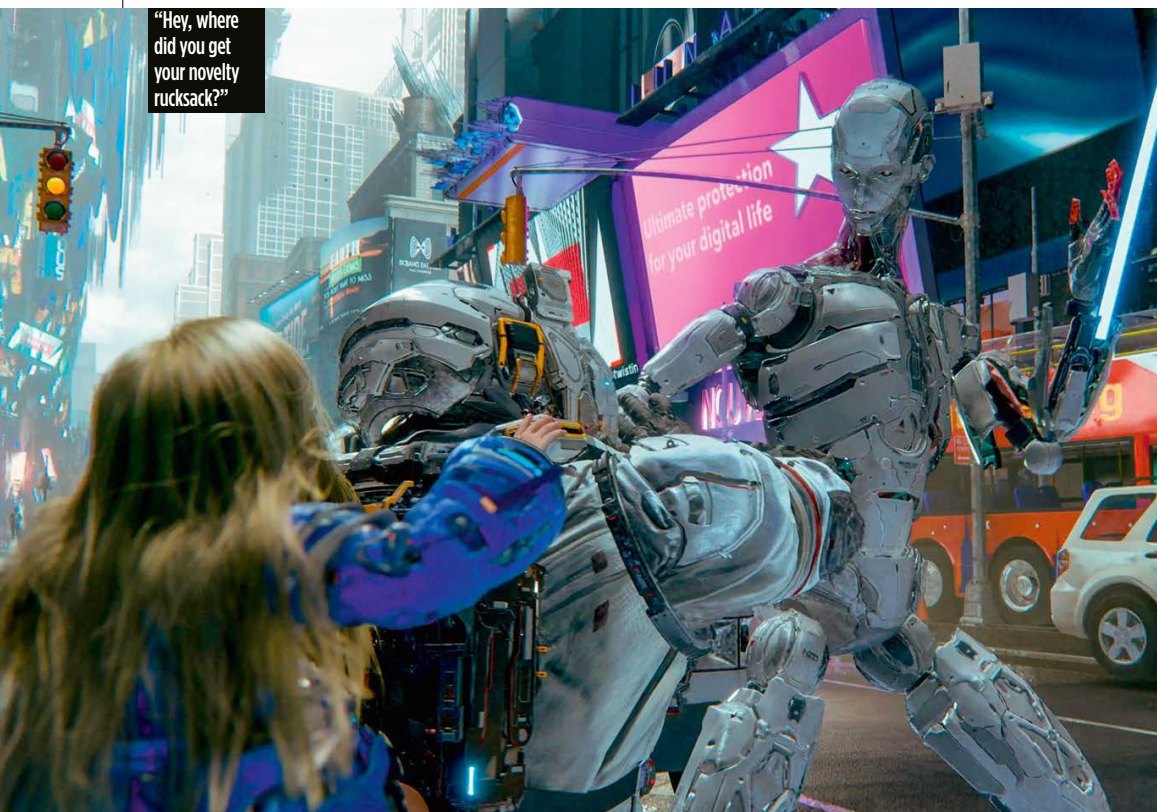
▶ Publisher Games Workshop

**BOARDGAME** Spearhead has

been a distinct game mode in *Warhammer: Age Of Sigmar* for a few years now. It dispenses with the fiddly complexity of army list building, giving each player a well-balanced preset force. *City Of Ash*, however, is the first time that it has been released as a standalone game.

In the box are two small armies. The Sentinels of Embergard are humans, and part of the wider Cities of Sigmar range. On the opposing side is Crixxit's Kill-Pack: Skaven from Clan Eshin. Impressively, with the exception of a single Skaven character, these are all brand new sculpts, with the humans particularly detailed and customisable. Both armies play differently, with the Skaven favouring melee, where their weapons are particularly nasty, while the human Grenadiers make use of ranged weapons.

Also included is a double-sided game board and a small amount of terrain. *Spearhead* plays fast (well, as fast as *Warhammer* gets, anyway, so earmark a couple of hours per game) and it's impressive how streamlined but detailed the system feels. This isn't simply a bare-bones version of *Age Of Sigmar*, but a distinct game. If you're looking for a way into *Warhammer*, it makes a fine starting point. **Will Salmon**





## INVINCIBLE VS

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PS5

► Also on PC, Xbox Series X|S

► Publisher Nintendo

**VIDEOGAME** This gory and relatively simple fighting game focuses on timing over memorising complex input sequences. It sees Mark Grayson and friends (and some foes) competing in 3v3 matches, in arenas inspired by the source material.

The likes of Atom Eve, Omni-Man and Battle Beast battle it out, chaining combos with grandiose finishers that call back to moments from the Prime Video series. While not every actor from the show is present, Aleks Le does an excellent job bringing the titular hero to life, while JK Simmons adds gravitas as Nolan Grayson.

Controlling one of your three fighters at a time, you can call in allies to assist by using L1 or L2, or hold down one of the buttons to swap your current warrior for another. You can call upon a teammate to break you out of an enemy's attack, or add to your own combo with a cleverly timed change. Timing is everything.

*Invincible VS* offers several game modes, from a single-player story where you play as multiple characters, to arcade options. The latter let you assemble your own team of three and unlock a different ending depending on the first name in your roster. The game also includes online PvP.

This is a thrilling fighter that serves up pulsating combat and buckets of gore. While the story lacks the emotional bite of the comic and TV show, fans won't want to miss it. **James Daly**



Visit bracing Weston-super-Mare – sorry, Carcosa.

## SAROS (Slight Returnal)

★★★★★

► **RELEASED OUT NOW!**

► Reviewed on PS5

► Publisher Sony

**VIDEOGAME** Developer

Housemarque crafted something of a critical darling in *Returnal* back in 2021, but one which never really managed to move beyond a niche audience. Now they return with what is practically an unofficial stealth sequel in *Saros*, a sci-fi roguelike third-person bullet-hell shooter (phew) which takes that formula and reworks it for broader appeal.

Our protagonist is Arjun Devraj, hired megacorp muscle sent to the world of Carcosa to discover why their previous three colonies haven't been picking up the phone. But on arrival, Arjun's own team immediately begins to slip into violent insanity as prowling monsters appear, heralded by eldritch eclipses in the night sky.

“A lean bit of cerebral sci-fi and pulse-pounding action”

*Saros'* story and gameplay might seem mismatched – frantic, bullet-hell gunplay interspersed with Lovecraftian horror – but Housemarque manages to pull it off, leaning into the unreality of everything. The characters' strange priorities make them feel chillingly untrustworthy, and even the roguelike gameplay feeds into themes of irrational obsession – in other words, throwing yourself into mortal peril over and over.

It helps that Carcosa is beautifully realised. The imagery is viscerally potent: fiery eclipses, walls of grasping hands, and twisting biomechanical machinery straight from the boiler room of HR Giger himself.

Still, there are a few frayed edges. Plot twists are pretty easy to see coming, the weapon pool feels a bit shallow, and perhaps surprisingly it's a shade too easy in the final act. Nonetheless, Housemarque has crafted a lean bit of cerebral sci-fi and pulse-pounding action that's worth anybody's time.

Joel D Franey

**i** Rahul Kohli (*Zombie, Midnight Mass, The Haunting Of Bly Manor*) provides the voice and face for Arjun Devraj.



## DOCTOR WHO: THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

★★★★★

► **RELEASED 18 JUNE**

► Running time 60 minutes

► Format CD/download

► Publisher Big Finish

**AUDIO DRAMA** This season of

Ninth Doctor audio adventures has largely stayed close to Rose's London home, the Powell Estate. There's a reason for that (beyond Big Finish wanting to make as much use of Camille Corduri as possible) and in *Thirteen O'Clock* – the halfway point of the series – we find out what it is.

Rose and the Doctor try to leave Earth again, but the TARDIS is pulled back to the estate once more. This time, however, they find it virtually deserted. As they try to navigate a shifting landscape, they encounter Milton Fry (Will Chitty), a lone survivor who's been hiding from Mrs Crook (Sophie Thompson), the old lady in Flat 13. Meanwhile one of the Doctor's old friends, Saffron (Indigo Griffiths), is searching for the Time Lord.

It's hard to say much more about the plot of *Thirteen O'Clock*, as the story draws considerable suspense from the sense that it's building to something huge. The reveal is one for long-term Big Finish listeners, but it works well, even if the middle act gets bogged down in Mrs Crook using the Doctor and Rose's doubts against them.

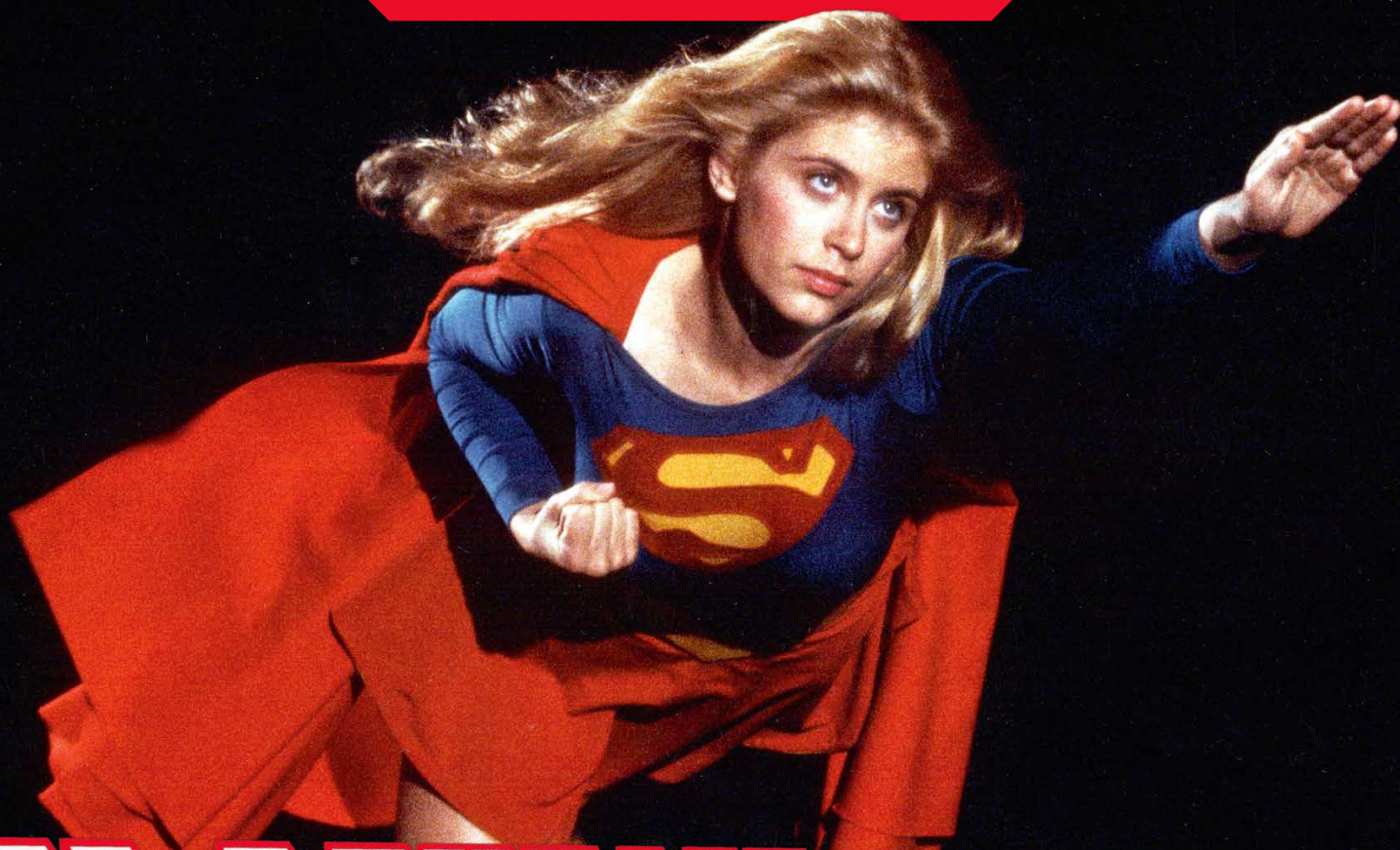
Still, the conclusion wraps up this mini-arc nicely, and certainly leaves the possibilities for more wide-ranging adventures in the latter half of the season wide open.

Will Salmon

# JULY 1984

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: NICK SETCHFIELD



## FLASHBACK

Supergirl sadly failed to soar, despite the hype.

### Female Empowerment

**19 JULY 1984** In the DC pantheon, Supergirl is known as the Maid of Might. But when it came to her screen debut, Kara Zor-El was the Maid of Might Have Been.

Introduced into the comics in 1959, this daughter of Krypton was originally earmarked to appear alongside Christopher Reeve in *Superman III*. When that idea was abandoned, the producers decided to launch a distaff franchise extension around her. "I said to my father, 'Okay, let's do *Supergirl*,'" remembered Ilya Salkind. "I thought it was a very interesting idea to explore."

A storyline by *The Dark Crystal*'s David Odell deployed Brainiac as the villain, scheming across multiple worlds in a sprawling cosmic

adventure. Warner Bros demanded the malevolent android's removal – just too *comic strip*, apparently – while the plot's planet-hopping scope was quickly ruled a budget-buster, necessitating an earthbound rewrite. Reeve agreed to cameo, but ultimately backed out, his enthusiasm for the cape clearly waning. In the final film, he's no more than a pin-up on a dorm room wall.

*Star Trek: The Motion Picture*'s Robert Wise was approached to direct, but he rebuffed the offer, as did Richard Lester, helmer of the *Superman* sequels. The Salkinds finally signed experienced journeyman Jeannot Szwarc, who had brought *Jaws 2* to the screen. "I wanted to inject lyrical poetry in the

film," said Szwarc, "because it wasn't a guy with big muscles."

At first, the Salkinds sought a genuine name for the title role. Media phenomenon Brooke Shields was in the frame before unknown 18-year-old Helen Slater won the part, auditioning in a homemade costume. Fresh from New York's School of Performing Arts, the teenager was thrown into a four-month training regimen, prepping for the gruelling wire and harness work that would leave us believing a girl could fly. "I had a deep connection to flying dreams," she later recalled, "so that part of the film was so very precious."

Slater was signed for a three-picture deal, but that became another might-have-been. Dismal box office grounded any chance of a return flight and prompted the Salkinds to flog the *Superman* screen rights to '80s schlock lords the Cannon Group.

Dolly Parton was the first choice for sorceress Selena, played in the film by Faye Dunaway.





Lance Guest starred as gamer Alex Rogan.

## Arcade Firepower

**13 JULY 1984** For a generation of thumb-bruising, high score-chasing fanatics, *The Last Starfighter* was more than just another summer blockbuster; it was wish fulfillment in widescreen.

"It conceptualises the ultimate dream of anyone intensely involved with videogames," said producer Gary Adelson at the time of the film's release. "To suddenly be whisked off to worlds beyond our own and to become a *real* space hero."

Screenwriter Jonathan R Betuel found inspiration by wandering into a Manhattan video arcade one lunch break. At the time he was reading TH White's *The Once And Future King*, a retelling of the Arthurian legend. These disparate worlds, ancient and electronic, collided in his mind, suggesting a new myth for the age of *Frogger* and *Asteroids*. "It was like the boy pulling the sword from the stone," he realised, spotting a kid engrossed in a game. "I thought, 'Wait a second, what if this silly talent means something somewhere?'"

*Halloween II*'s Lance Guest was cast as Alex Rogan, the trailer park teen whose prowess at the game *Starfighter* finds him drafted for genuine interstellar combat, defending the Rylan Star League against the menace of the Ko-Dan Empire. The film's effects followed the lead of *Tron* by using nascent CGI technology to conjure 3D-rendered spacecraft in place of traditional physical models.

The end credits promised that a real *Starfighter* game would follow. But at the last moment Atari baulked, less than convinced by the film's prospects. Didn't they know there was a war on?

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It was Diana vs Daley, and Diana won!

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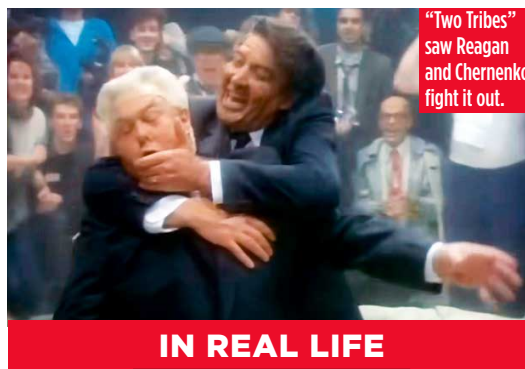
## Visitor Attraction

**30 JULY 1984** *V* arrived on British TV screens as a canny bit of counterprogramming. An industrial dispute meant ITV would no longer be able to share coverage of the Los Angeles Summer Olympics with rival broadcasters the BBC. Seeking a viewer-hooking alternative, they brokered the rights to a miniseries that had been a hit in America the previous year.

Creator Kenneth Johnson had proven himself a master of high-concept populism with *The Bionic Woman* and *The Incredible Hulk*. *V* had the same immediate appeal,

depicting the fight against a fascistic, rodent-guzzling alien invasion force whose motherships hovered ominously above the cities of the world.

ITV stripped the original two-part series and its three-part sequel *V: The Final Battle* across five nights, offering a welcome alternative to the shot put and modern pentathlon. The finale scored 11.55 million viewers, more than the audience for Daley Thompson bagging a second gold medal that August.



"Two Tribes" saw Reagan and Chernenko fight it out.

### IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** Margaret Thatcher
- **US President:** Ronald Reagan
- **In the charts:** Frankie Goes To Hollywood make it a nuclear summer as "Two Tribes" sits at number one.
- **In the news:** Liechtenstein becomes the last European country to give women the right to vote; a fire in the roof of York Minster causes millions of pounds' worth of damage; FC Barcelona sells Diego Maradona to SSC Napoli for a world record fee of \$10.48 million; Robert Maxwell buys the *Daily Mirror*.

© ZTT RECORDS/FRANKIE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

### ON THE SHELF



- Arn-hult flexes his muscles on the cover of *Starlog* issue 85 as *Conan The Destroyer* arrives in American cinemas.

© STARLOG GROUP INC.



# Italy

Italia celebrates its national day, Festa della Repubblica, on 2 June. How much do you know about the country's connections to sci-fi, fantasy and horror?

Quizmaster Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

### QUESTION 1

Which famous children's character was created by Italian author Carlo Collodi?

### QUESTION 2

Name the Italian producer whose production company was credited on the likes of *Danger: Diabolik*, *Barbarella*, and the 1976 version of *King Kong*.

### QUESTION 3

Which Italian director connects *City Of The Living Dead*, *The Beyond* and *The House By The Cemetery*?

### QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Name this *Doctor Who* story set in Italy.

### QUESTION 5

The 1965 film *The 10th Victim* (*La Decima Vittima*) was based on a short story by which sci-fi author?

### QUESTION 6

In what kind of establishment is Dario Argento's 1977 horror *Suspiria* set?

### QUESTION 7

Name the Italian director behind 1990: *The Bronx Warriors*, *The New Barbarians* and *Escape From The Bronx*.

### QUESTION 8 Picture Question

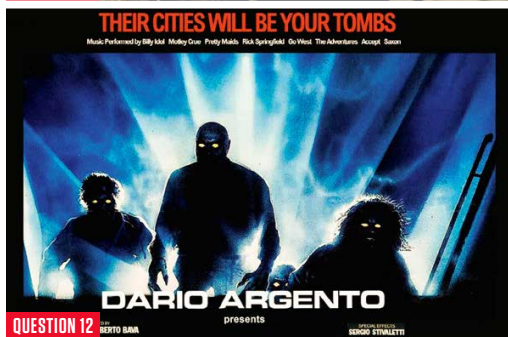
Supply the title that's been removed from this movie poster.

### QUESTION 9

Which famous Italian did Captain Janeway enjoy spending time with on the USS Voyager's holodeck?

### QUESTION 10

Who directed the 1965 film *Planet Of The Vampires*?



### QUESTION 11

In which Bond film does the spy make his way around Venice's waterways in a gondola that can turn into a hovercraft?

### QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Supply the title that's been removed from this movie poster.

### QUESTION 13

Which Italian sci-fi movie starred Caroline Munro as smuggler Stella Star?

### QUESTION 14

Who composed the main theme for John Carpenter's *The Thing*?

### QUESTION 15

Which Italian director sometimes used the pseudonym Anthony M Dawson?

### QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Name this *Doctor Who* story set in Italy.

### QUESTION 17

Which hero's name completes these Italian fantasy film titles? \_\_\_\_\_ *And The Conquest Of Atlantis*, \_\_\_\_\_ *Against The Moon Men*.

### QUESTION 18

What is the Italian title of Michele Soavi's *Cemetery Man*?

### QUESTION 19

Claudio Simonetti was a member of which Italian prog rock band, famed for their movie scores?

### QUESTION 20

Which Italian actor played Ming's daughter in 1980's *Flash Gordon*?

- Answers**
- 1 Pinochio
  - 2 Dino De Laurentiis
  - 3 Lucio Fulci
  - 4 "The Vampires Of Venice"
  - 5 Robert Shekley
  - 6 A dance school
  - 7 Enzo G Castellari
  - 8 *Calitiki - The Immortal Monster*
  - 9 Leonardo da Vinci
  - 10 Mario Bava
  - 11 *Moonmaker*
  - 12 *Demons*
  - 13 *Starcrash*
  - 14 Emilio Moricone
  - 15 "The Masque Of Mandragora"
  - 17 Hercules
  - 18 *Dellamorte Dellamore*
  - 19 Goblin
  - 20 Ornella Muti

### How did you do?

Ranking your Italian knowledge

0-5

Danger: Diabolical

6-10

Bleak Sunday

11-15

Bronx Warrior

16-19

Suspiria-tional

20

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# Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



A little help is required when Herbie loses a wheel!

(director Robert Stevenson, writer/producer Bill Walsh) who had made *Mary Poppins* such a hit for his studio in 1964. The Volkswagen factor was down to Walt himself, the result of a vehicular casting call that saw an auditioning Beetle elicit pats from crew members.

Released the same month *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* made its big-screen debut, *The Love Bug* became the second-highest grossing film of 1969 at the US box office. Yet it would be a while later before this writer saw it at a London cinema – the long-gone Odeon St Martin's Lane. It was there I fell in love with Herbie and his antics, from the way he'd spurt oil on the trousers of his disparagers and get soused on Irish coffee to his miraculous ability to drive on water. He also plucked at my heartstrings, not least in a sorrowful scene where he attempts to hurl himself off a San Francisco toll bridge.

*Herbie Rides Again* (1974) added surrealism to the mix via wacky dream sequences that saw flying and fang-sporting VWs stalk the nightmares of Keenan Wynn. *Herbie Goes To Monte Carlo* (1977) was more of a retrenchment, with Jones returning for another racing-based jaunt through scenic French locales, in which a stolen diamond found its way into our four-wheeled hero's gas tank.

I was yet to become a critic back then, but I could sense that the series was running on fumes. My fears were confirmed by *Herbie Goes Bananas* (1980), a South America-set fourquel so abysmal (Herbie as a matador?) that I could never quite look at "Ocho" (as orphan lad Paco nicknames him) the same way again. Still, were Herbie to putter up alongside me and open his door, I'd be happy to be taken for a ride. After all, he is the original self-driving car. ●

Neil would also give *KITT* a spin, but would draw the line at *Christine*.

## Herbie, the Love Bug

Neil Smith, freelance writer



"You let that little car get under your skin, didn't you?" says Michele Lee to Dean Jones in 1968's *The Love Bug*.

She could have been talking directly to yours truly, so smitten was I with sentient Volkswagen Beetle Herbie from

the second he first pootled into my nascent, Disney-loving consciousness.

Herbie was conceived by author Gordon Buford for his never-published short story "Car-Boy-Girl", and the notion of a bucket of bolts with a mind of its own was appealing enough for Uncle Walt to snap up the rights and assign the project to the same double act

### Fact Attack!

→ Herbie's "53" was a tribute to Don Drysdale of the Los Angeles Dodgers, a pitcher whose shirt bore those same digits.

→ The LA opening of *Herbie Goes To Monte Carlo* saw Herbie leave his tyre prints in cement at Grauman's Chinese Theatre.

→ Dean Jones reprised his Jim Douglas role in a short-lived 1982 TV series, *Herbie The Love Bug*, and a 1997 TV movie.

→ Herbie returned to the big screen in *Herbie: Fully Loaded*, a 2005 reboot with Lindsay Lohan behind the wheel.

→ A VW Beetle is glimpsed underwater in 2016's *Finding Dory*, a wink to Herbie getting thrown overboard in *Herbie Goes Bananas*.

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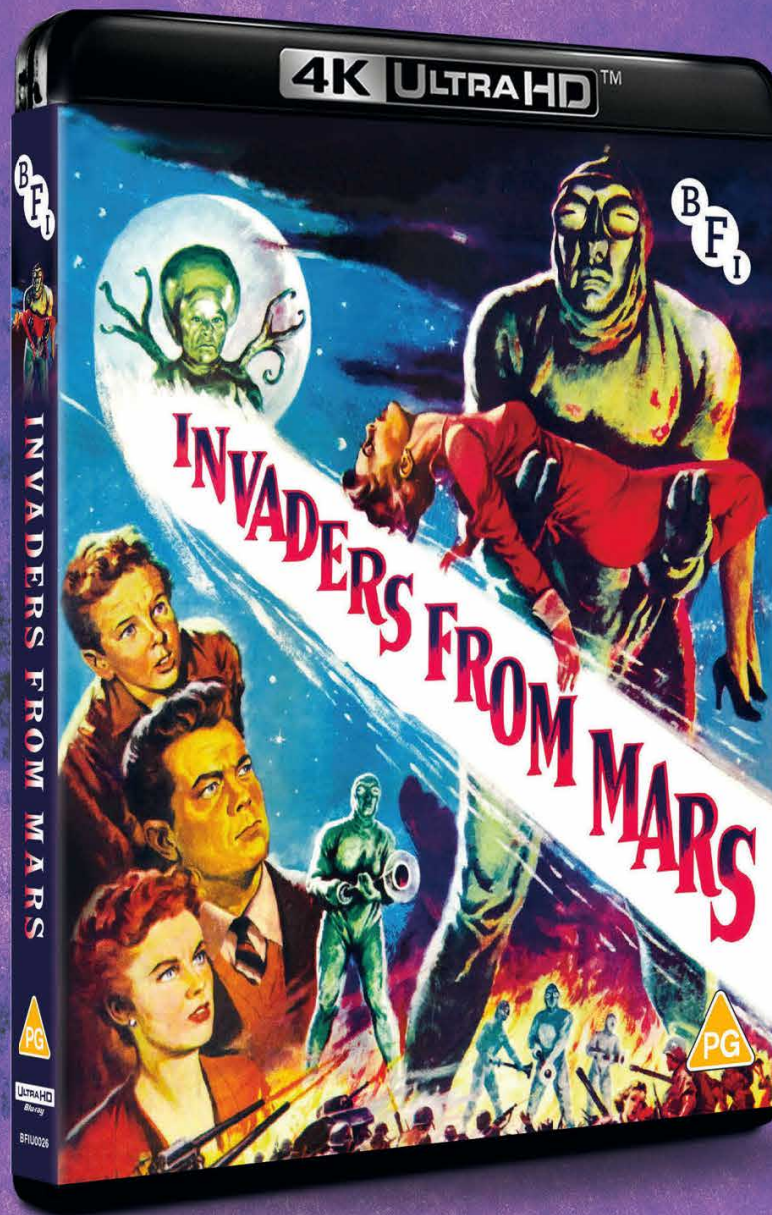
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