

THEATRICAL TRANSFORMATION

Leigh Whannell Brings a Classic Movie Monster Back to the Big Screen

BY REBECCA PAHLE



➔ The first full moon of 2025 isn't until the final week of January, but those who hanker for a hair-raising moonlit adventure don't have to wait that long: *Wolf Man* will be in theaters on January 17. In this Universal film directed by Leigh Whannell and written by Whannell and Corbett Tuck, a family of three move into an isolated house deep in the forest. Marriage troubles between a couple (Christopher Abbott and Julia Garner) are exacerbated when the husband begins to show signs of turning into ... well, you know. The movie is a take on the werewolf mythos—and, of course, on Universal's own key role in turning horror into big-screen entertainment.

With *Wolf Man*, Whannell takes a classic monster and reimagines him through a new lens, using the classic werewolf tale to poke at audiences' existential fears in the way that only horror can. Whannell has certainly spawned a number of nightmares in his day, having written two of the most consequential horror films of the 21st century: *Saw* (2004) and *Insidious* (2010). He made the jump to directing with 2015's *Insidious: Chapter 3*, followed by the bonkers actioner *Upgrade*

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(2018) and, in 2020, an updated version of one of the Universal classics: *The Invisible Man*. Released in February, *The Invisible Man* had three weeks in theaters before Covid-induced shutdowns ground the cinema industry to a halt—a temporary loss felt keenly by Whannell, who can *really* nerd out about movie theater minutiae. BOXOFFICEMOJO spoke to Whannell and Tuck about their love of the theatrical experience and crafting a horror movie made for the big screen.

Were there any particular films that you took as reference points for the aesthetic of *Wolf Man*?

Corbett Tuck: The idea of transformation was really big for us. It was [during] the pandemic, and we were scared to leave our house. It was such a different time. We liked the idea of a metamorphosis, almost. [The script] started out as an allegory for what was happening in the world. We didn't borrow from it, but we were inspired by *The Fly*.

Leigh Whannell: Definitely *The Fly*. And another film that Corbett and I love: *The Thing*. They're both movies that were made during the height of practical effects, and so you have this very tactile ...

They're very goopy films.

LW: Very goopy, very tactile. It's really a hard line in the sand between the CGI era and the practical effects era. I feel like the height of practical effects, before *Jurassic Park* and *Terminator 2* came along and started this new era, was *The Thing* and *The Fly*. They're also two movies that aren't using practical effects to get laughs. In a lot of '80s horror films, like *Reanimator*, there's a very darkly funny edge to it. I loved that when I was a kid, and Corbett did, too. We love those movies. But the thing that makes *The Fly*, and to some extent *The Thing*, unique is that they're not doing that. They're not going for laughs. They're not using the effects to gross out teenagers. They're actually telling a tragic story. *The Fly* is very tragic. *The Thing* is very dark in tone. It came out the same year as *E.T.*, and everybody wanted these cuddly aliens! But *The Thing* is just so nihilistic. It has a dark ending. Those movies were really big for Corbett and me. Outside of that, anything from *Amour* to *Under the Skin* were influences on us.

Just going off of the trailer, I can see some of those Covid-era anxieties

popping up. The main characters being a family—there was definitely a lot of rethinking about relationships around that time.

CT: It's definitely infused with the dread and the anxiety of that year. We were all locked in our houses together with our families. It was such a bizarre time that we couldn't help but put that feeling into the script. A lot of it is set in one location. It's this family. They're stuck together. They can't go outside. When I look back now, I'm like, "Wow, we really did put a lot of what we were going through [into it]." I don't think we meant to. In hindsight, this is a film infused with that year.

That's one of the things that's great about horror movies: They can really get into the cultural anxieties that were prevalent at the time.

LW: It's what horror has always been good at, isn't it? You can wrap the extremities of horror around a good metaphor. You can exorcise your anxieties in a way that's not direct. During the Vietnam War, there's a lot of anxiety, there's all this turbulence in society. You can make a film that's directly about Vietnam, like *Platoon* or *Apocalypse*

Now, or you can make a horror film that's about zombies, but it's *actually* about Vietnam. It's always been this great reflecting pool for society's anxieties.

What were the movie theaters you went to as kids?

CH: I'm from the suburbs in Texas, so I think the nearest theater to my house was the dollar theater, which was the one I could afford to go to as a kid. And [after that] it was your typical suburban multiplex.

LW: I grew up in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. The downtown area [of Melbourne] is very cool, very artistic. That's not where I grew up. Like Corbett, I wasn't going to see Fellini films in a beautiful single-screen theater. That came later.

You know what I miss? There was this thing in the '80s; shopping malls would have theaters where [the auditoriums were] underground. You would go down a set of stairs. Around '82, '83. I'm assuming the trend was similar in the United States—the decoration was always red. Red walls, red concession stand. I'm thinking of the theater from, like, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. That seems to have died off, but I get





really nostalgic about it. The Waverley Gardens theater [in Melbourne]; it was a two-screen theater. It was down a set of steps. Very subterranean. It doesn't exist anymore. I get so nostalgic about those.

Recently, in the last few years, for some reason I've become really obsessed with things being projected on film. In Los Angeles, there are a couple of theaters that only show things on film—like the Vista, [a historic one-screen theater in Los Angeles purchased by Quentin Tarantino; see our profile in the April 2024 issue].

Now, if I look up the Egyptian Theater and see all these older movies playing, whether it's *Aliens* or *Lawrence of Arabia*, I'm only interested in going if it's being projected on film. If [the showtime listing] says, *The Thing*, screening on Wednesday

the 10th, and I look at it and it says "Format: DCP"...

There are some movies where it's like, if I'm going to see *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* on the big screen for the first time, I'm not doing a DCP. I'll wait.

LW: Not to sound all crazy about it, but Tarantino once said that projecting on video is basically TV in public. I don't have any prejudices, but if I'm going to go see *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in a movie theater... If it's a DCP, I can just stay home and watch a 4K disc. But if they're projecting *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in 70 mm. I am seated. I am *there*.

I'm envious of filmmakers who had their career peaks in a time when cinemas were dominant. I look at Steven Spielberg,

and I'm like, "Oh man, you really nailed the timing." He made *E.T.* in a time when there was no competition: Video games were in their infancy. Social media was barely an idea in the back of Bill Gates' mind. Movie theaters were *the* dominant pop culture art form, so *E.T.* was important, and people lined up around the block to see it.

I didn't make *Wolf Man* for Netflix. I made it for Universal. It's a theatrical movie. To go theatrical, that's really important to me. I don't have anything against Netflix! Corbett and I watch a lot of streaming TV when we go to bed at night. But, as a filmmaker—and I think Corbett and I are in sync on this—the theatrical experience ... We're trying to preserve it. We're trying to do our part to keep movie theaters alive and keep them thriving. And one way to do that is: Don't make movies for streamers. Make them for studios. Get a guaranteed theatrical release.

Saw has a passionate fanbase and ten-plus sequels. If it had come out on Netflix—putting aside the fact that Netflix, as a streaming giant, didn't exist then—I don't think it would have become what it is today.

LW: I agree. I just went to a 20th anniversary screening of *Saw*, and there were these super hardcore, passionate people [in attendance]. Corbett and I [have] three kids, so our time to go to the movies is getting less and less, because of how time poor we are. But we try. Corbett, your favorite movie theater right now is an Alamo Drafthouse. I always try to convince Corbett to get a boozy milkshake when we go there, because I want a sip, but I don't want the whole thing.

What was the last movie you saw in a theater?

LW: The last thing I saw that really, really inspired me and made me feel great about the state of the movie industry [was], a few weeks ago, I saw two movies in one week, *Anora* and *The Brutalist*, and both of them were shot on film. Both of them were projected on film. *The Brutalist* was projected in 70 mm and *Anora* was projected in 35 mm at the Vista [during Beyond Fest]. Both are amazing movies on their own, but it gives me so much hope about the future of cinema that people are still making great stuff and shooting it on film. ▶

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