Written by Samuel Zimmerman
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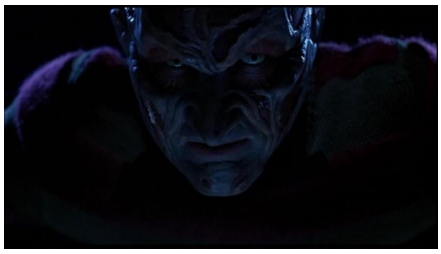
Recently, a blog went up on FANGORIA taking a handful of legendary horror directors to task for essentially riding the waves of their legacy and failing to continuously and contemporarily put out excellent work. No doubt, it's an interesting theory worth debating and investigating. However in my eyes, its author made one fatal mistake (and no, it wasn't that confrontational opening line—although that was slightly devoid of taste). Nick sought to claim that Wes Craven neither is, nor ever was, great. I'm under the belief that no matter how you feel about many of his films, that's simply a falsehood. So with two weeks until the filmmaker's latest, MY SOUL TO TAKE, hits theaters, I've decided to look at one of his movies a week (excluding the landmarks like LAST HOUSE, NIGHTMARE and SCREAM) to showcase that even during misfires and his lesser praised works, Craven displays talent, chops and incredible imagination. Read on for week five (check out lat week's entry here)—my look at 1994's return to Elm St, WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE.

At this point, it's probably clear I have an affinity for Wes Craven. I've mentioned before that he's basically the first director I really remember recognizing by name and becoming a fan of, and despite the fact that SCREAM is very easily one of my favorite movies of all time, his contributions to my film-viewing adolescence started even a couple of years earlier than that. WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE was the first horror film I have a clear memory of watching and being affected by, at the age of 7. Back in the days of the black box atop your television that magically provided all the pay-per-view channels for free (and which you were always oddly paranoid about), I saw a great many things I probably wasn't supposed to, but I'll never forget my instant interest in and infatuation with NEW NIGHTMARE (and thanks to said illegal cable, I was able to rewatch it many, many times). What I found when I viewed it most recently, however, was that although I loved it, I never really appreciated it.

NEW NIGHTMARE was the last film (well, until MY SOUL TO TAKE hits) that Craven both wrote and directed, and is without doubt one of the best in his oeuvre. Returning to his most iconic character 10 years after the original, Craven here creates the best NIGHTMARE sequel, and when viewed in hindsight, it shows he was more than ready to tackle the self-aware meta qualities of SCREAM. The movie focuses on original NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET star Heather Langenkamp (playing herself) as she and her son become tormented by Freddy, both literally and figuratively. In the midst of a 10th-anniversary whirlwind, Langenkamp is surrounded by old friends and colleagues (including Craven, Robert Englund and John Saxon, also showing up as themselves) and rabid fans, but she is also disturbed by terrible dreams,

earthquakes and premonitions that suggest Freddy may be more real than she can imagine.



The concept and whole story of NEW NIGHTMARE is Craven's extremely creative way of commenting on horror, fandom, legacy and even saving his beloved bogeyman from disgrace. Even before she realizes what's after her, it seems Langenkamp is struggling to live a life in which she isn't associated with Nancy Thompson every few seconds. It doesn't look like she outright hates it, but she's definitely haunted by her most recognizable role, subject to extreme fan reactions (her first instinct when she starts receiving threatening phone calls is that it's a deranged admirer) and unable to really break through into more mainstream gigs (even when she gets a call from New Line, it's for another Freddy flick). On a side note, Langenkamp does a great job in this film, and it's sad she was never able to find more success.

Craven's explanation for the real-life manifestation of Freddy, and the recurring motif of Heather reading fairy tales to her son Dylan (Miko Hughes), equate horror cinema with fables and myths, putting forth the idea that tales of terror are as old as civilization and storytelling. More than once over the course of the movie, Heather is asked if she has let her child see her films, and/or would she let him watch them—yet Craven seems to be taking to task the idea that horror films and screen violence may have a damaging effect on young children or adolescents, especially since the tale of Hansel and Gretel and its proceedings seem to shock Heather as much as any movie, and those original, dark and deviant Brothers Grimm stories have been entertaining families for hundreds of years now. The "Hansel and Gretel" parallels keep on coming toward the film's end, when Heather follows a trail of sleeping pills (as the siblings did breadcrumbs) to find her son and face Freddy one last time.

The comparison of fable and NIGHTMARE continues when Craven reveals that it's not exactly Freddy who's stalking Heather and her loved ones, but a age-old demon, one who can become trapped in stories (a very fairy-tale-sounding idea). The demon has moved from tale to tale, and Freddy is its most recent cage, but it's now looking to break free (but keep Krueger's visage, as it has become used to and is now enjoying the character).

When Craven explains just what this demon is, it's a thinly veiled criticism of what the NIGHTMARE series—and, often, other sequels and originally biting and sinister characters—became. He explains that the entity wants freedom because over time, its stories have become "watered down" and soft, losing their essence. Even when Heather is speaking to Englund about her suspicions that Freddy may be out there, she says it doesn't necessarily seem like Freddy—it's darker, more evil. Craven and his audiences were ready for Freddy to be the monster he once was, not the comedian he turned into, and returning to the franchise and making this film, the director managed to reinvigorate and reinvent his slasher.

On a narrative and visual level, there's an incredible energy to this seventh entry in the series, and you can tell everyone involved really threw their all into the production. And while some of the FX are a bit dated, the intensity of the setpieces isn't lost, particularly a freeway sequence in which Dylan, who has been suffering hypnosis-like states, wanders onto the road and Heather chases after him, dodging cars and a giant Freddy in the sky (!). Craven also cleverly and amusingly revisits some of the famous and notable moments from the original. In the hospital, when Freddy takes down (or up) Dylan's babysitter along the walls and ceilings à la the original film's Tina, it's not a simple retread. We actually get to see the monster this time as well, defying gravity and vying to act out his celluloid exploits in real life. It's a great scene, one that also had me questioning why they even bothered to redo it in this year's NIGHTMARE remake, considering Craven had already revisited it in a much stronger manner.

The ending, like many of Craven's conclusions, goes for broke. Heather slides down into Freddy's world, which showcases ancient and historical qualities (the columns and bathhouse pools possibly signifying the age of this "demon") as well as the fiery basement look we've come to expect to house the gloved one. And his blackly humorous attempts at devouring both Heather and Dylan (his stretched-out jaws, trying to eat Dylan; his absurdly long tongue/serpent slithering around his leading lady) are forever ingrained in my brain. It's a neat juxtaposition that's conveyed at the climax: As Freddy tries to break out of his silver-screen confines, Heather climbs back in and accepts her role as Nancy, not run away or be haunted by it—especially if she wants to keep Freddy down and not have him (or the idea of him) violently disturb her life.

WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE, like many of the director's films, is as fun as it is intelligent, making it a truly satisfying experience, a movie truly worth revisiting if you haven't

watched it in a while and definitely worth seeing if you haven't. It's just too bad the Fat Boys didn't do another theme song.

Also, apparently Heather Langenkamp and John Saxon did not age between 1984 and 1994…

You can read the blog that incited my seven week response right here , as well as check out my initial idea and drop me suggestions for what Craven films you'd like to see me tackle here

{jcomments on}