

Jeff Kirkendall's Thoughts For The Month Column

Thoughts, Opinions, Reviews, Commentary & More!

Hello and Welcome! My name is Jeff Kirkendall and I'm an independent filmmaker and actor from the Upstate New York area. This is the section of the Very Scary Productions website where I write about topics related to independent filmmaking, digital video production, acting, movies in general, horror movies in particular, my own indie movies, as well as anything and everything related or in between.

I decided to create this commentary page because I find that I often come across things that either interest me, excite me, intrigue me, or maybe just bug me. Any topic related to movies and cinema is fair game, from the most mainstream to the most controversial. For example I'll often read about movie projects that I have a strong interest in or opinion on, for one reason or another. This page gives me a forum to discuss these things. It's all about discussion and furthering understanding of our pop culture. Anyone who has feedback concerning what I have to say here, feel free to contact me (see the contact link at <http://www.veryscaryproductions.com/>).

I'd also like to point out that the following is just my opinion, and everyone is free to agree or disagree with what I have to say. Enjoy, and to all the Indies out there: Keep on Filming!

SUBJECT: A Classic Horror Film revisited - The return of ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** to the big screen this past September - October 2006

Note: The following discussion of ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** contains some plot details which could be considered spoilers.

Those who have read through my biography page know that I talk very fondly of the 1984 horror classic ***A Nightmare on Elm Street***. * In fact, to this day I still consider it my favorite horror film. I first saw the picture around 1986 on home video, about the time the second movie in the series (aptly titled ***A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 2: Freddy's Revenge***) had come out. Oddly enough, prior to seeing ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** I can't remember having had much interest in the horror genre. However this film about an average teenage girl fighting to stay alive and overcome a terrifying and seemingly unstoppable force just captured my imagination. Soon after this I watched the second film in the series on video, and from that time on, starting with ***A Nightmare on Elm Street Part 3: Dream Warriors***, I looked forward to each sequel that debuted in theaters. As most know by now, the character of Freddy Krueger (played by Robert Englund) went on to become a horror film icon and is arguably one of the most compelling villains in cinema history. However for me it really was the drama and human element in that first film that made it so memorable. Now, over twenty years later, I've finally had the chance to do something I didn't think I'd ever get to do...experience this 1980's classic with an audience in a modern state of the art multiplex.

When I first saw the promotion for the screening preceding the movie trailers before ***Snakes on a Plane*** (see the September 2006 TFTM column above) I was thrilled. Seeing ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** in theaters was kind of like a daydream I'd given up on long ago. After purchasing tickets and realizing it was actually going to happen, I was really psyched but at the same time wondering how the experience would hold up to my

expectations. Would I still view the movie with the same reverence I've always had for it even after seeing a plethora of more modern (and bigger-budget) Hollywood films since? Would there be a big crowd at the movie theater or just a few die-hard, long-time fans? Would the audience still dig the movie? And would the film seem dated or would it hold up well? Now these may not seem like overly weighty (or even necessary) questions, but admittedly they are thoughts that crossed my mind. After all, this movie was important to me and highly influenced my viewing habits for years to come. I believe ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** worked so well because it blended mind-bending, horrifying graphic imagery with a very plausible human drama in a new and unpredictable way. For those not familiar with the film, the story is set in a suburban neighborhood where several teenaged friends are having similar scary dreams about a boogeyman who is trying to kill them. This fiend, Fred Krueger or "Freddy", is dressed in dingy clothes, is horribly burned, and uses a homemade razor-tipped glove to terrorize them. As it turns out, he is the nightmare incarnation of a real-life murderer who was burned alive by the parents of the kids, and now this evil spirit is getting back at these people by going after their children. Unfortunately for the kids, this particular demon has the power to transcend the dream world in that whatever he's able to do to someone in their dreams happens physically, allowing him to continue his murderous ways even after death. As the film series would go on over the years Freddy would come more to the forefront, becoming the star of each installment and devising new and ever cleverer ways of killing. (In fact an extra feature at this screening was an approximately half-hour montage of "Freddy's Greatest Kills", which showcased all the death scenes throughout the ***Nightmare on Elm Street*** films). ** However in the first film Freddy was mostly in the shadows and the movie really focused on young Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp), the protagonist and "final girl". It was a very human drama about a teenaged girl who (as was actually stated in the movie) goes through three days of hell. She witnesses the gruesome and initially unexplainable deaths of several of her friends and then must use every resource at her disposal both from within and without to fight to stay alive. She also comes to realize that her very flawed parents cannot help her, and that there is a dark underbelly to her small suburban town which on the surface seems so bright and sunny. It was my identification with this character and her plight that kept me transfixed on this amazing story. And of course having a character one can strongly identify with and watching that character grow, in this case from innocent teenaged girl into responsible young woman who takes charge of her situation and life, is a key element in any good storyline.

I'm happy to say that as far as horror films go this one definitely stands the test of time in most respects. The most visceral moments in the movie still retain much of their impact, particularly the deaths of Tina (Amanda Wyss) and Nancy's boyfriend Glen (Johnny Depp). Most of the scenes where Freddy is pursuing Nancy are still as suspenseful and heart-pounding as I remember them being, and the special effects for the most part are still impressive despite the lack of CGI effects. The soundtrack also still works well and is appropriately eerie and disturbing. The scene where Freddy bursts through the large mirror on Nancy's bedroom door and the ensuing fight they have in her room is still one of my favorite moments in the film.

One thing I noticed right away at this screening was that the audience was made up of mainly younger people - mostly teenagers from what I could gather. Although I found this to be a bit surprising, as I expected it to be mostly older, long-time fans, it was also cool to see that kids were into this movie. Also the theater was fairly full, alleviating any worries I might have had that nobody would care about seeing an older film such as this

on the big screen. This also relates to my question about whether or not the film would seem dated or still hold up well. Although the audience was definitely into the movie, I have to admit there were bits of laughter here and there throughout the showing. Now I've always felt ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** is generally not a humorous film, with the exception of possibly a couple lines of dialogue. This movie came out 22 years ago however, and was produced on a relatively meager (by Hollywood standards anyway) budget. Comparing it to the visual sophistication of today's movies coupled with the sophistication of today's moviegoers can at times understandably make it seem dated, especially to a younger audience. I've witnessed this kind of reaction before, and the fact is that modern horror movies (and other genres for that matter) have to be written in an ultra-hip style in order to avoid eliciting laughter from younger audiences. It's all about generational differences. Knowing this lessened the blow when the crowd laughed in scenes that I still viewed in exactly the same way I've always viewed them. Overall my reverence and enjoyment of the film wasn't impacted much by the audience and I have to say there were even a few nuances here and there that I noticed for the very first time. I also believe, as stated above, that my fellow audience members really liked the film overall.

All in all the experience did hold up to my expectations and I'm very pleased I was finally able to see this horror classic in a theater. I definitely need to once again commend New Line Cinema, this time for their commitment to and respect for this film. *** For those that aren't familiar with the New Line Cinema story, in a nutshell ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** really was the film the company was initially built upon, and is even to this day referred to by some as "the house that Freddy built". It's great to see a corporate-owned entity retain their commitment to an early classic and its fans. Now if they'd only think about re-releasing part 2 into theaters...

* I launched Very Scary Productions (and began writing this column) in 2002, long after the last film in the ***Nightmare on Elm Street*** series had come out. Had I been running the site in 1994 when ***Wes Craven's New Nightmare*** debuted, I would most assuredly have written about how absolutely floored I was over this re-imagining (of sorts) of the original ***A Nightmare on Elm Street***. I never thought any film could match the original, but this film comes as close as one possibly could, and in some ways actually extends beyond and surpasses the first film. I won't go into a lot of detail here, as it would take an entire column to talk about and praise the movie, but basically ***Wes Craven's New Nightmare*** is a film which brings back original cast members Heather Langenkamp, Robert Englund and John Saxon (along with Wes Craven and New Line CEO Robert Shaye) to play themselves in a story about Freddy escaping from the realm of movies and attacking his creators. It's a brilliant premise and stands (despite some great critical reviews) as an often overlooked cinematic horror film gem. I highly recommend it.

** The term "Final Girl" is one that comes from the 1992 book *Men, Women & Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* by Carol J. Clover. It refers to the female survivor or heroine in a slasher film. This book has chapters on the slasher, occult, and rape-revenge film genres, and features some fascinating and enlightening insights and perspectives on each.

*** I've read several articles about how New Line Cinema owes much of their early success, and by most account their very existence, to ***A Nightmare on Elm Street***. The company recently put out a new DVD release of the film called *A Nightmare on Elm Street - Infinitum Edition*. The new disc has lots of extra features and apparently touches

on this very topic with the inclusion of a featurette called *The House that Freddy Built: The Legacy of New Line Horror*. I can't wait to see it.