Interview: Wes Craven on Last House On The Left

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I heard that it took over a year to find the right director for Last House On The Left. What were you looking for in a director?

Well, we wanted someone really really skilful. It's frankly sometimes hard to find directors who really want to do a remake, so you have to convince them that they're going to have a lot of freedom and a lot of support. And then there's not that many directors out there who are really good and affordable at the budgets that we do these films at. You have to catch them just at the right moment, because those who are really talented get snapped up very quickly by the major studios.

But we were just very thorough in looking at a lot of different films and a lot of directors' work. You want to get a guy who can just look at the films and say 'this is the guy that can do it'. When we saw Hardcore [previous feature from Iliadis] we just thought, this is the guy.

Do you think it's a shame that so many talented directors just use horror as a springboard to other things, instead of becoming a 'grand master of horror' like yourself?

[laughs] I don't know - they might be smarter! It's good, I suppose, to become some kind of a name in horror. But there are times when I've certainly felt that it's restrictive; you don't get to do comedies too much, or whatever. But I've just managed to put other elements into my films, where they have some funny moments or whatever. But some directors stay. Sam Raimi's stayed in it for most of his career, one way or the other, and some go in and out of it…that's what I would have preferred to have done a little bit more. I would certainly not want to totally leave horror but there are times when I've had scripts that were just comedies that I've tried to get going…

So you feel typecast to the extent that you can definitely get a horror movie off the ground, but maybe only 30-40% of anything else?

Well, it's gotten much much better, I think since Scream. My name is also associated with comedy and laughter now in the theater, and Music Of The Heart brought out a whole new side, so now there's much more a sense that I'm just a really good director. So I don't feel nearly as typecast as I did even five or six years ago.

Was it hard to decide how much the remake of Last House should diverge from the original?

We approached Last House as a story that already existed. I saw it in Bergman's film and Bergman saw it in a book-tale in a minstrel song that had been around in his country for several hundred years. So we thought that here's a great story that has lasted for centuries, the basic core of it. An innocent girl and a more worldly-wise girl go off and they go off on…a pilgrimage, basically, in the original tale and encounter terrible people who do terrible things and then by accident end up in the house of the parents. They take them in, show that they're decent people by offering them hospitality and then discover in the middle of the night that the people have killed their daughter. And what do they do…?

And beyond that, you know…do what you want to do! [laughs] And I suppose if [Iliadis] had come up with some horrible trash, we would have said 'Thanks, but no thanks'. But he came up with a very interesting concept; basically it's the same characters. We didn't insist that they be the same characters, but I think to completely diverge from the original film - might as well just call it something else! But I find Krug really interesting in this version of him. Making Krug and Francis [Aaron Paul] brothers was really interesting; there's a great dynamic there and the performances are really fantastic.

The sadism in Last House probably can't shock as much now as it did in the seventies…do you regret that some of the 'forbidden fruit' of horror is now fairly mainstream?

Well I think it was something that had to be played out, certainly if you're referring to films like Saw and so forth. But I think in a way that wasn't widely acknowledged, it was a period where torture was a very important issue in the real world, with the Bush administration. So I'm not surprised that torture got into movies and was exploited one way or the other, because it was certainly very much in the American mind. From both sides, you now? Do you need to be that tough if that's what toughness is? Or would I be able to survive it if I were

confronted with it myself...if somebody tortured me? How would I deal with that?

I think that was a relevant issue for a while. But I think that's it's such a repulsive thing, in a way…I'm not saying necessarily it's bad, but it's hard to take. You can't do that for very long before it just becomes something that's 'been done'.

So I think that forces horror to go off in new directions. That's been an interesting thing for me to watch over the course of my career, that horror does go through these cycles. Someone will do something that puts the finger right on the pulse of the decade, almost, and then there'll be a lot of copies and versions of that general concept…the 'masked killer' or whatever it is…

..and then somebody does something very different. Nightmare On Elm Street was very different. So different that it took three years to get money to make it, because people thought 'What?' [laughs]. Who's gonna be afraid of anybody who's in a dream? So when I made that film, and when I was looking for the money to make that film, there was a very common phrase in Hollywood: Horror is dead - people are done with horror.

So I think when you reach a point where cruelty or whatever seems commonplace, then it'll tend to disappear, and new things will come along.

The rape scene in the new version is as hard to watch as the original. How would you explain to non-horror fans why someone would want to watch something that painful - which many do?

Somebody in the marketing department at Rogue films said, speaking of himself and the other people from marketing that were in the boardroom where we were meeting, he said 'We're all parents here, and I don't think any of us could have beared to watch that sequence if we didn't know that the parents were going to get revenge at the end'. So it's very interesting that they were fuelled and able to get through it by saying 'These people are going to get paid back!' [laughs].

Obviously there are horror films or films like the dogma group that don't have pay-offs at the end, and it just ends horribly. But I think that anything that happens in a film that's painful to watch is, in a way, an anecdote to the reality - the real thing in life. Whether it actually happens to us or not, there's something in the human mind that needs to test itself against it. And look at it from both directions, I think. 'Could I do something like that?' and also 'Could I survive something like that?'.

It's the same as climbing mountains or jumping out of airplanes with a parachute - you're just testing yourself against things that are frightening, in a way that you're pretty convinced you'll survive. But it does something about making you feel tougher or more seasoned or whatever it is.

There's also something of the 'forbidden' about it which I think is important in general. Horror films tend to show things that parents wouldn't want you to see [laughs]. The reason things are forbidden is because they're very powerful and controversial

Do you think the 'morality-tale' element of American horror movies is likely to diminish over the next five or ten years?

It's a very powerful thing in American cinema, and I think of it more in terms of paying attention, in that there are many, many diversions to paying attention. In horror films, if you're having sex when there's somebody dangerous around, you're not 'on the point'; you're not aware of what's the most crucial thing to be aware of at that moment. And it doesn't matter if it's sex or drugs or alcohol or being stupid [laughs]…all those things are presented in horror films and the direct results are shown [laughs].

In that sense it's not saying any of that stuff is bad in itself, but you better not be using that stuff so much that you're not aware of what's important in your life at any given moment - especially at moments of threat. So that's why I think horror films deal with this stuff. There are some things in life that are really dangerous and potentially threatening to you, and you'd better be aware of it when it's happening and not deny it. And not say 'I'm going to go outside, it's just a cat' [laughs]. 'I'll go see what it is…' And the smart ones are the ones that survive. And in that sense I think they're a morality tale not in that those things are bad, but they're more like a psychological story of the hero or heroine, who's the person that's able to face painful truths.

How do you feel about the backlash against the number of remakes currently being announced? Do you feel it's excessive or pretty much 'business as usual'?

A lot of it is business as usual. For a while everybody was remaking Japanese ghost stories. Sometimes there's a reason that you can point to pretty reliably. There was a period around Columbine when horror films were being kind of assailed by the government. The studios got very afraid that they were going to be sued, and studios at about that time were all being taken over by corporations. And the corporations are very careful about not being in a position where they could be sued for their product. Because they just look at these films as product. They might as well be an automobile or something.

So everybody looked for what's safe, and ghost stories are much safer than violent stories. They die, but they don't get stabbed [laughs]. Everybody went in that direction and that was safe for a while. And I think that remakes are safe financially because you have the film from the past that's made money and audiences are aware of it, and there's a slightly better chance that you can get people into a theater to see something that'd remade.

The reason that we remade Last House is because we came back into ownership of it again after 30 years. So that was a matter of…we could make money, and we could also have a very interesting creative experiment of taking a new director and having him do the same basic material, and let's see what happens, if you get really really good people to do it.

Could I ask you about the new Scream movie and what stage you're at with it?

There are some conversations going on between myself and Bob Weinstein, so I know it's in the works, so to speak. I know that Kevin [Williamson] is writing, but I don't know the nature of the script. I have heard that David [Arquette] and Courtney [Cox] are virtually locked in. And I've made it known that I would be glad to read a script. I don't know whether it's in my interests to be doing a fourth movie, but on the other hand Scream was so unusual that it had a much higher quality than normal.

And I must say that Bob Weinstein was willing to spend money on sequels at a greater extent than previous films. So we had a better budget on Scream 2 than we did on Scream 1, and a larger on Scream 3, so that you can keep the quality going, as opposed to the usual pattern where they get financed at two-thirds the level of the previous film. That's the formula; sequels make maybe twenty percent less than the original, so they take the budget down commensurately. And of course you can't get as good an actress and you can't mount as good a scene, so it's…y'know, a self- fulfilling prophecy.

But Bob Weinstein's willing to put money on the line there and get people like Drew Barrymore and whoever, and we were the same way with the remake of Last House; it was very much a matter of not going right away, even though we could have, but finding the right director and getting the right actors and getting something that's really top-quality.

Your fans are really looking forward to 25/8, as you're writing and directing again for the first time in quite a while. When might we be seeing that?

I think it'll be late this year or early next year. We might shoot three more days in July, because we have an idea for a really fun little button on the ending, and other than that we're virtually locked down editorially, so it'll be a matter of getting that new little piece together.

What made you go for a new production crew on 25/8? Were you looking for a fresh approach?

[laughs] Well, it didn't happen quite that way. At the producer level, yes, that was partially it, but also the producer that I had been working with was off working on Last House and I did want to make a change there. As far as everybody else…in some cases people that I'd worked with for years and years like my editor Patrick Lussier has now become a director, so he's just not available. That's much to my regret, but I'm very happy for him, obviously - he was fantastic. My first assistant director Nick Mastandrea has directed himself now and was not available.

A lot was determined by the fact that we shot in Connecticut on a tax-rebate deal. It's becoming rather popular in the United States, but it requires that we used all people from the East coast, and we couldn't bring anybody from the West coast in. But once it went in that direction, it was interesting to work with all-new people.

Could I ask you about any other upcoming projects that are occupying you right now?

Well I'm keeping an eye on Scream 4, obviously. We're in early talks on Hills Have Eyes 3 and on a remake of People Under The Stairs, which I think could be very interesting, as well as a possible remake of the Spanish film Before The Fall, which could also be interesting. Those are in the early early stages of finding the right writers and getting a studio lined up.

Last House On The Left goes on general release in the UK on 12th June.