The CULTURE PAGES

BE AFRAID

Thirty years after Freddy Krueger first gave us nightmares, horror—in movies and on TV—could be the cultural cure-all for what ails us.

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FREDDY LIVES

An oral history of *A Nightmare on Elm Street.*

BY CRAIG MARKS AND ROB TANNENBAUM

Clockwise from top, Robert Englund and Wes Craven; Heather Langenkamp; Jsu Garcia; filming the bedroom scene; Johnny Depp.

"GREAT HORROR films don't win Academy Awards," says horror auteur Wes Craven. Instead, they make money. Thirty-odd years ago, Craven had an unusual idea for a movie, inspired by a newspaper story about a boy who suffered from horrible nightmares and then died mysteriously in his sleep. After all the major studios passed on his script, Craven met New Line Cinema's Bob Shaye, an erudite film-industry hustler. Their *A Nightmare on Elm Street,* released in November 1984, would become one of the most important, and lucrative, franchises in film history: It helped restore the evil monster—in this case, the striped-sweater-wearing, dream-haunting, pizza-faced killer Freddy Krueger—to top billing in fright films; spawned eight sequels that, along with the original, grossed a cumulative $370 million; turned New Line into an industry powerhouse; and even launched the career of a young actor named Johnny Depp. ¶ Here, the film's principals recount its ignominious beginnings, mishap-plagued production, and, of course, unkillable afterlife.

Wes Craven (writer and director, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*): In the '60s, I was teaching humanities at a college in upstate New York and trying to publish a novel. But nothing was happening. So I moved to New York City and got a job as a messenger at a place that made movies. A friend, Sean Cunningham, who went on to do *Friday the 13th,* was given a small budget to produce a scary movie, and he told me to write something. I'd never seen a horror film in my life; I'd fallen in love with Fellini. I didn't know what to write. Sean said, "You were raised as a fundamentalist; pull that stuff out of your closet." That became *Last House on the Left.* My second horror film, *The Hills Have Eyes,* received good reviews. I directed some TV movies of the week and did *Swamp Thing,* but after that, I couldn't get any work. No paycheck for three years. I lost my house. Also, my first marriage had failed, and I was smoking a lot of grass, then graduated to cocaine. Finally, I walked away from the drugs. And I had this one idea, so I set off to write a script.

Mimi Craven (Wes Craven's second wife, 1982–87): We were living in Venice, and Wes had a studio in the back. He'd be there in his bathrobe and a pith helmet, banging on the computer.

Craven: I'd read an article in the L.A. *Times* about a family who had escaped the killing fields in Cambodia and managed to get to the U.S. Things were fine, and then suddenly the young son was having nightmares. He told his parents he was afraid that if he slept, the thing chasing him would get him, so he tried to stay awake. When he finally fell asleep, his parents thought this crisis was over. Then they heard screams in the middle of the night. By the time they got to him, he was dead. He died in the middle of a nightmare. Here was a youngster having a vision of a horror that everyone older was denying. That became the central line of *Nightmare on Elm Street.*

Bob Shaye (producer, founder of New Line Cinema): I wanted to be a director—I'd directed some short films—but nobody wanted to hire me. Then a guy told me that distributing films on college campuses was a big business. My dad was in the wholesale-grocery business, so I understood distribution. New Line began in a rent-controlled apartment on Second Avenue and 15th Street. It was $109 a month.

Jack Sholder (director, *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*): Around 1980, New Line decided to get into production beginning with low-budget horror. I directed their first one, *Alone in the Dark,* set in a mental hospital during a blackout. It didn't do very well.

Craven: A friend introduced me to Bob Shaye. He was one of the most remarkable men I've ever met. He was a Fulbright scholar, an excellent chef, and very knowledgeable about the arts.

Sholder: Bob was the first guy to distribute John Waters, the first to distribute Werner Herzog. But he always felt like an outsider, and that drove him. He's kind of like Harvey Weinstein, except that Harvey is a gargoyle.

Shaye: I went to L.A. and contacted Wes. He told me the story—I thought it was fantastic, because everybody has nightmares. Little did I know everybody in Hollywood had already passed.

Sean S. Cunningham (director, *Friday the 13th*): I cautioned Wes, "I don't know if an audience is going to buy this. Yeah, dreams are real, but at some point, you wake up."

Shaye: The budget started at $700,000 and ended at $1.1 million. All the investors, at one time or another, backed out. Half the funding came from a Yugoslavian who had a girlfriend he wanted in movies.

Craven: A lot of the killers were wearing masks: Leatherface, Michael Myers, Jason. I wanted my villain to have a "mask" but be able to talk and taunt. So I thought of him being burned and scarred.

Sholder: The great characters in horror films—Frankenstein, Dracula—they all had personalities. They were portrayed by real actors—Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi—not stuntmen.

Rob Zombie (musician, horror director): As kids, we never even called them "horror" movies; we called them "monster" movies. Michael Myers, Jason, and Freddy started a new wave of iconic monsters.

Craven: I couldn't find an actor to play Freddy Krueger with the sense of ferocity I was seeking. Everyone was too quiet, too compassionate toward children. Then Robert Englund auditioned.

Robert Englund (played

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF WES CRAVEN (ENGLUND AND CRAVEN); COLLECTION OF JIM DOYLE (REMAINING)

Freddy Krueger): I thought I was on the cusp of celebrity, the result of starring as an adorable alien in the NBC mini-series *V*. *V* was a hit and got green-lit as a series. During the hiatus, the only job I auditioned for that fit my schedule was *Nightmare on Elm Street*. That's the real reason I said yes.

Craven: Robert wasn't as tall as I'd hoped, and he had baby fat on his face, but he impressed me with his willingness to go to the dark places in his mind.

Englund: Driving over to the audition, I licked my finger and put it in the ashtray of my Datsun Roadster. That's an old theater trick: Ash gives you a nice shadow under the eyes. So I dabbed a little there, greased my hair back, and went in. I looked strange. I sat there and listened to Wes talk. He was tall and preppy. I posed a bit, like Klaus Kinski, and that was the audition.

Craven: A lot of horror villains used knives as weapons, and I didn't want to duplicate that. So I thought, *How about a glove with steak knives?* I gave the idea to our special-effects guy, Jim Doyle.

Jim Doyle (mechanical-special-effects design): I sketched a few gloves, then built a "hero" glove. You know, the sharp one. The rest of the time, we had "stunt" gloves. The hero glove was dangerous. Every time someone put it on, they hurt themselves, because if you closed your fist, the blades cut your forearm. Oops.

Englund: I sat in the barber's chair in David Miller's makeup shop, hours and hours of trial and error. While David poked at me with his crusty brushes, I grew more and more profane. That's how I started to find the voice of Freddy.

Freddy Krueger turned into a lovable Halloween costume, but 'Nightmare on Elm Street' is a dark, nasty, brutal film.

Heather Langenkamp (played Nancy Thompson): I was 18 years old, a freshman at Stanford, and I'd taken time off to try and make it as an actor. I'd done a TV movie of the week, a public-service announcement, and some commercials, like Tab. I wasn't completely inexperienced.

Ronee Blakley (played Marge Thompson): The movie was financed using my name and [actor] John Saxon's name, so we were well paid. They used unknowns for the rest of the roles and probably gave them scale.

Langenkamp: Scale back then was $400 a day, maybe. I made around $12,000, which to me was a king's ransom.

Jsu Garcia (a.k.a. Nick Corri; played Rod Lane): I was 19, and my life was horrible. I'd finished being homeless and had a feeling of emptiness, so I'd do drugs. On the set of *Nightmare*, I snorted heroin in the bathroom. I've never talked about this, but I was high in the scene when I'm talking to Heather through the bars in the jail cell.

Langenkamp: On the day we shot that scene, his eyes were watery and they weren't focused. I thought, *Wow, he's giving the best performance of his life.*

Shaye: Charlie Sheen was initially cast as Heather's boyfriend. He wanted $3,000 a week, which we couldn't afford.

Craven: The actor who played the coroner came to me and said, "I have a friend who's in town. His name's Johnny Depp, and he's interested in getting into movies." I read with Johnny. His fingers were yellow from smoking unfiltered cigarettes, and he was greasy and pale. My 14-year-old daughter was in from New York with a friend. I took the headshots of the actors I was considering for Heather's boyfriend, Glen. I put them out on the kitchen table and asked the girls, "Who would you pick?" They immediately pointed at Johnny. I said, "Are you serious?" They both said, "He's beautiful."

Englund: Johnny Depp was the most polite young actor I've ever worked with. He called me "sir" the first week.

Doyle: Wes said we needed a fantastic hook at the end of the first reel. So I pitched him a rotating room as a good way to kill Rod's girlfriend, Tina. He thought I was nuts. We had no budget. I thought, *Well, what if we kill Heather's boyfriend using the same set?*

Craven: The revolving room was a real puzzle to construct. They bolted two racing-car seats to the wall, one for the cinematographer and one for myself, and we were in harnesses. For Johnny's scene, 300 gallons of blood had to come out of his bed. I wanted the grips to rotate the room slowly, so blood would run down the walls. But the room took off in an enormous spin and blood went everywhere. It hit every light and blew every fuse.

Englund: In *Nightmare*, all the adults are alcoholic, they're not around. The adolescents have to wade through that, and Heather is the last girl standing. She lives. She defeats Freddy.

Blakley: It's the same theme as *Rebel Without a Cause*: disaffected youth. The parents verge on being villains.

Langenkamp: Nowadays, there's a lot of care about presenting the lead female in a way that will turn guys on. With Nancy, it was the opposite. She looks like an average teenager. She has ugly hair. All of her clothes are kind of pink. Like, who wears pink? Everything about her is just not right.

Shaye: Wes had written an ending where Heather vanquishes Freddy and goes off to school the next day. It's beautiful sunshine, and that's the end. I'd seen *Friday the 13th* and some other films, and there's always a zinger at the end. There was no zinger here.

Craven: Bob wanted a hook for a sequel. I felt the film should end when Nancy turns her back on Freddy. Bob wanted to have Freddy pick

PHOTOGRAPH BY MIMI CRAVEN

WHY YOU'RE SCARED OF CLOWNS

"Clowns, by definition, are supposed to make you laugh," says Harvard psychiatrist Steven Schlozman, "but in the background is the fear that they won't, and all of us have that in the back of our minds: the fear that you won't actually be able to do the very thing which you're designed to do."

up the kids in a car and drive off, which reversed everything I was trying to say—it presented Freddy as triumphant. I came up with a compromise, which was to have the kids get in the convertible, and when the roof comes down, we'd have Freddy's red-and-green stripes on it. I regret changing the ending. It's the one part of the film that isn't me.

Shaye: When I showed the film to my dad, he said, "The ending is weird." I told him about the awkward compromise Wes and I had made. He said, "You gotta change it. You're gonna fuck up this movie!" We just left it.

Mimi Craven: The first time Wes and I saw the movie with a real audience was in New York. It was a very urban crowd. They were screaming at the screen: "Don't go in there, you stupid white woman!" We walked out going, *Okay, this is good.*

Craven: It did very well in the first week [$1.45 million]. The second week, it did even better [$2.05 million].

Shaye: The near-term gross of the film was $24 million. We'd had films that were successful but nothing of that magnitude.

Sholder: New Line became "the house that Freddy built."

Craven: I received no money from sequels, no money from merchandising. That didn't come until ten years later, when Bob called me: "We'd like you to make one more Freddy film, even though we killed him off in the last sequel." So, what the hell, I took the meeting, and they offered me a cut retroactively.

Englund: Freddy was in Johnny Carson's monologue every night. Will Smith rapped about him. We became part of the culture.

Amanda Wyss (played Tina Gray): *Nightmare* became really popular on video. Two Halloweens later, I opened my door and saw four Freddies.

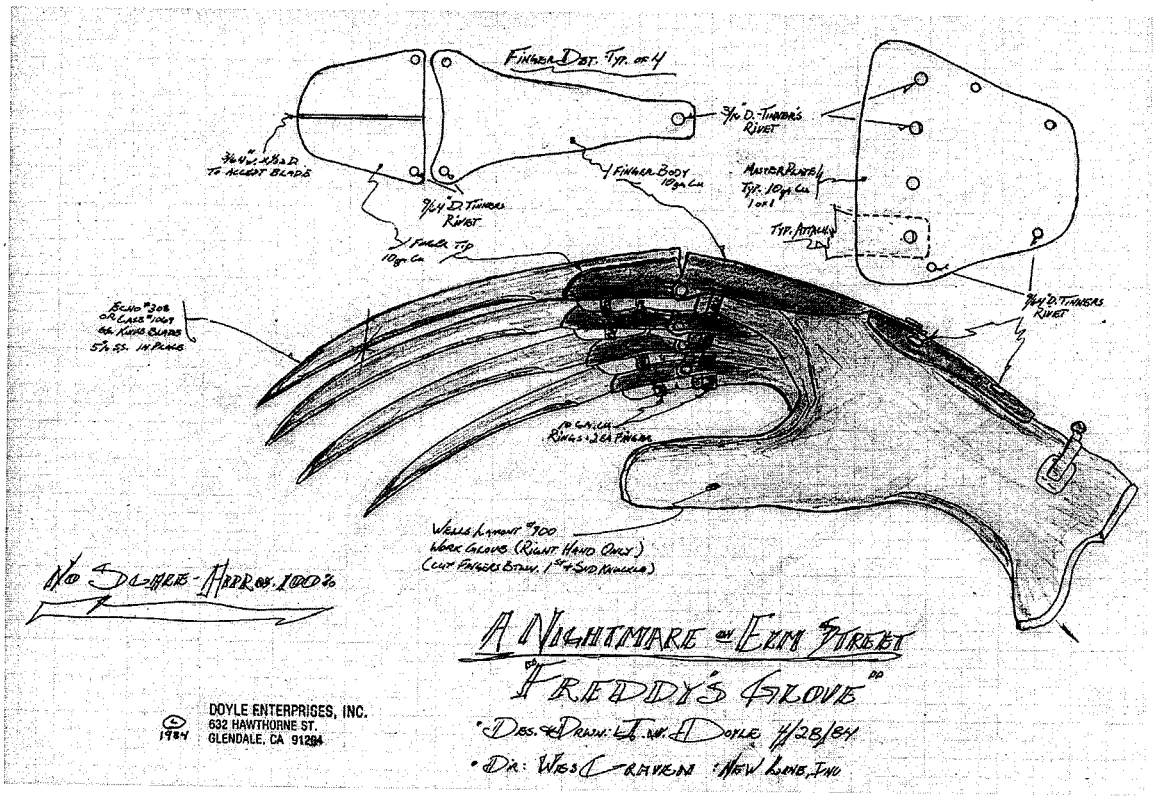
Englund: I was grand marshal of the Greenwich Village Halloween parade one year in full Freddy drag. Two phenomenal-looking girls in harem costumes propositioned me. They wanted me to keep the claw on.

Zombie: It's easy to forget, because Freddy Krueger turned into a lovable Halloween costume, but *Nightmare on Elm Street* is a dark, nasty, brutal film.

Craven: My mother never saw any of my films until she was in her late 80s, and that was *Music of the Heart* with Meryl Streep. Her continual plea was, "Honey, why don't you make nice films?" She'd worked to send me to college, and to her, I'd gone off and made these demented films. For years, I felt like I'd failed the family.

Langenkamp: *Nightmare* didn't help my career much, because people have a stuffy mentality about horror films. I kind of feel what a porno actress might feel.

Englund: After Freddy hit, it took me a while to realize how big it was. I was in New York to sign autographs at a science-fiction convention. It was me and William Shatner, and my line was out the door and down the avenue. After that, I went along for the ride. I'm happy I did, or I might have ended up doing theater in Santa Clarita. ■



Original proposed sketch for Freddy's glove.