

THE CONJURING:
THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT

THE DEVIL'S WORK

HAVING GROSSED \$1.8 BILLION WORLDWIDE, **THE CONJURING** UNIVERSE IS OFFICIALLY THE MOST SUCCESSFUL HORROR FRANCHISE EVER. AS THE LATEST FILM HITS CINEMAS, WE CATCH UP WITH DIRECTOR MICHAEL CHAVES AND PRODUCER PETER SAFRAN

WORDS **STEVE O'BRIEN**

A young boy with short, light brown hair and glasses is shown from the chest up, leaning forward and splashing water in a pool. He is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and a dark wristband on his left wrist. The water is splashing around his hands and arms, creating a dynamic and energetic scene. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

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IT WAS ONCE COMMON WISDOM IN Hollywood that horror franchises don't do big numbers. *Halloween*, *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, *Friday The 13th*, *Saw* et al may have their cheerleaders, but box office-wise, they're small fry next to your *Fast & Furious* flicks and your *Pirates Of The Caribbeans*, billion-dollar juggernauts that keep studio execs in Lamborghinis and Mayan Sicar cigars.

That was until *The Conjuring* came along. Few expected James Wan's 2013 supernatural scarefest to hit like it did. After all, Wan's previous feature, 2010's *Insidious*, had grossed just under \$100 million worldwide, which was considered pretty decent for a mid-budget horror. So when *The Conjuring* ended up as one of the best performing movies of 2013, grossing a whopping \$320 million against a \$20 million budget, it rewrote the rules on what horror films could do commercially.

Since then, we've had the inevitable *The Conjuring 2*, plus a further five spin-offs – three *Annabelle* films, *The Nun* and *The Curse Of La Llorona* – all set in the “*Conjuring* universe”, a vast horror ecosystem overseen by James Wan and his producer partner Peter Safran.

The *Conjuring* films, which orbit around real-life “paranormal investigators” Ed and Lorraine Warren (Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga), are the mothership movies, however. Now, five years after the second film, comes *The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It*, which sees Wan handing the directorial reins to *The Curse Of La Llorona*'s Michael Chaves.

“We were doing our final mix on *La Llorona* and I got a call from James,” Chaves recalls, telling *SFX* how he secured one of the biggest gigs in horror. “I just exploded with excitement. Every morning, I'm waking up and I can't believe that I'm directing ‘*The Conjuring 3!*’” →

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"I really hope this torch doesn't go out suddenly..."

It was a hearty sign of confidence in a man who'd made his feature debut with 2019's *La Llorona* (a 1977-set thriller that shares a character with the first *Annabelle*). "The *Conjuring* films were very much James Wan's baby," says co-producer Peter Safran, "and we were very cautious about handing that baby over to another parent. But Michael really delivered with *La Llorona*."

With the fresh director comes a new model of *Conjuring* movie. Whereas the first two films were claustrophobic, shadow-drenched haunted house tales, the third movie takes Ed and Lorraine on the road. More *The X-Files* than *The Haunting*, it's based on one of Ed and Lorraine's most publicised cases, where a man called Arne Cheyenne Johnson shot and killed his landlord Alan Bono, and later claimed in court that he'd been possessed at the time of the crime. It was the first ever court case in the US in which the defence sought to prove innocence based upon a defendant's claim of demonic possession.

"It was always on our list of ones that were worth exploring," reveals Safran, who has worked on every *Conjuring* universe movie. "We like to draw as much as we possibly can from the true story, and then obviously embellish and create a narrative that makes for an exciting film."

"It's a really controversial, infamous case where Ed and Lorraine Warren were coming to the defence of the murderer," adds Chaves. "They were putting their careers on the line for this very unlikely, long-shot case."

Despite the story's notoriety, the filmmakers bided their time. "You couldn't start the *Conjuring* franchise with this story," says Chaves. "You have to build up the goodwill and really understand the Warrens over the course of the previous two movies."

The Devil Made Me Do It fast-forwards the Warrens' story once again – by five years, to 1981. Those between-movie time jumps, aided by some canny music choices (apparently Blondie's "Call Me" plays a central role in this film), help give each instalment a unique flavour, but *Devil* promises an ever bigger



"So, you two, you say these words here. Get it now?"

break from what's come before. Chaves's brief was to deliver a much more visually expansive *Conjuring* film (most of the location work took place in Atlanta, Georgia), with horror-tinged procedurals such as *Seven* and *The Silence Of The Lambs* being talked up as reference points.

"One of the things that we really connected on is the idea of doing basically *Seven* in the *Conjuring* universe," says Chaves. "How do you take the cinematic language that's been established with the *Conjuring* movies, then apply it to a different case? What happens when you take the Warrens out of that haunted house? That was one of the most liberating things, because I think James is realising that you can't sleep on the *Conjuring* franchise. If the universe is going to continue, you can't keep on making haunted house movies, you

need to start going into different and unexpected territories."

Though we're being promised something new, Chaves is keen to remind us that it'll still feel like a classic *Conjuring* – hell, it wouldn't be a *Conjuring* movie without, for instance, a freightage of jump-scares. "There's definitely *The Conjuring* language," the director says. "And there are certain kinds of ideas and rhythms that fans expect – it's just that we introduce them in more surprising ways."

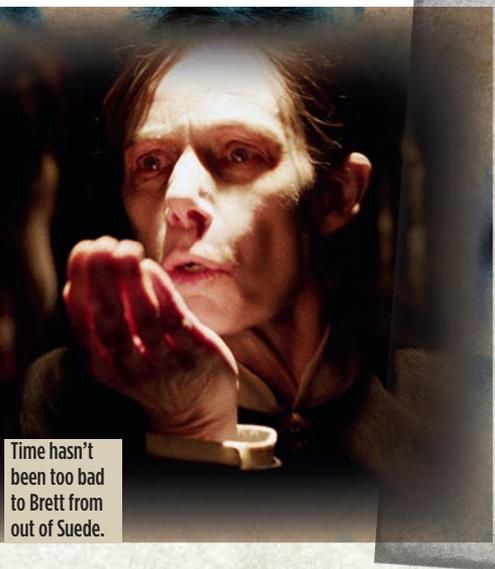
Chaves reveals that another movie that fed into the making of *The Devil Made Me Do It* was Peter Medak's *The Changeling*, a sombre supernatural classic from 1980 that headlined George C Scott as a composer haunted by the ghost of a long-dead child.

"I see a lot of the influence of *The Changeling* in the very first *Conjuring* film," he says. "I would watch it every other week during prep. It has so much of the soul and the language of the *Conjuring* films."

Of course, the '80s was the decade of the "Satanic Panic", when reports of ritual abuse, particularly of children, would appear in newspapers and on TV on an almost weekly basis. It was inevitable, given their fame as



"I'm thinking, like, *The Exorcist* meets *Psycho*..."



Time hasn't been too bad to Brett from out of Suede.

TRIAL AND TERROR

Ruairi O'Connor plays Arne Cheyenne Johnson

Does playing a real person make things easier or harder?

Well, in this version of events, it's not really a real person I'm playing: it's entirely to service the story, and the story is, again, told through the eyes of Ed and Lorraine Warren.

Arne Cheyenne Johnson is still alive, isn't he? Did you try to meet him?

For me, it wouldn't be very useful to try and draw on exactly who he is now and not really who he was then, as the character I play in the movie doesn't know if he did it himself, and that's an important aspect.

Were you a fan of *The Conjuring* films?

I hadn't watched the *Conjuring* films, as it turned out. I thought I had, but actually what I'd seen was the first *Insidious*, and I'd been quoting it and referencing it on set! But no, it wasn't something that had popped up in my life. I'm glad actually, because now, after seeing all the films, it would have been really daunting if I was a big fan of them.

You did additional photography after lockdown...

Yeah, it was a few months ago, with all the current protocols, so I'm quite used to getting my nose swabbed now! The original filming was very arduous, as I'm possessed for 90% of my time on screen, so it's pretty physically gruelling. I was living in a very dark headspace.

supernatural sleuths, that Ed and Lorraine Warren would become embroiled in this world, which is exactly what happened when, in 1981, they were called in to assist with the exorcism of 11-year-old David Glatzel: a boy who was "possessed" in Brookfield, Connecticut before the "demon" allegedly moved into Arne Johnson.

"There were a lot of these murders in the '80s where people were blaming demons or Satanism as the reason that they murdered,"

“As much as these films are about demonology, they're also about faith and love”

says Chaves. "Lorraine would often work with the police – there were certain police departments who would call her in on missing persons cases. That's something that's never really been explored in a *Conjuring* movie."

In many ways, the relationship between Ed and Lorraine Warren is why these films play to much broader audiences than most horror flicks. There's a toasty warmth to their chemistry that Safran believes is key to why audiences keep coming back. That and the fact

that these films offer relatively ungorry thrills. They're horror films that horror junkies and non-horror types dig equally.

"The *Conjuring* movies are very much a love story between Ed and Lorraine couched as supernatural thrillers," suggests Safran. "The thing I'm most proud about the first *Conjuring* was that Lorraine [who died in 2019] said we'd done such a beautiful job of projecting her relationship with Ed and that love story. And I think we really continue that with this film."

"They bring so much heart and so much charm to these films that they feel like classic movies out of the gate," adds Chaves. "Their relationship anchors these movies. As much as these films are about demonology, they're also about faith and love."

Devil originally wrapped in August 2019, but just as additional photography was about to ramp up in early 2020, the pandemic hit. Later in the year, when they were finally able to start filming again, they couldn't get Patrick Wilson. Then they couldn't secure Vera Farmiga. And then it was Ruairi O'Connor (who plays Arne Johnson) who was unavailable...

"We were just waiting through the whole pandemic to finish the movie, to get these extra scenes in," reflects Chaves. "In the beginning, it felt like, 'Okay, we have plenty of time, this is going to happen', but then every week would tick by and then I started biting my fingernails and thinking, 'Oh, my gosh, are we going to get these and what's going to happen?'"

But they finally did it... "Yep, we finished," he laughs. "It's definitely a trick working through Covid but, you know, that's definitely a first world problem."

Safran won't be drawn on what project is next on the slate for the franchise after this eighth entry ("It's a real fan-favourite character people have embraced and loved," is all he'll say, the tease), but does promise more stories set in this rich and chilling universe. And with other movie franchises – *Star Wars*, the MCU and so on – expanding into TV, he's open to the idea of using the small screen.

"Oh, we're happy to create content for any platform," he says. "So I wouldn't be surprised if, somewhere down the road, that opportunity arose. You know, for stories that you can only tell in longer form that you couldn't just as a feature film."●

The Conjuring: The Devil Made Me Do It opens in cinemas from 28 May.

