

Rebecca Hall: "AWAKENING" to Ghosts

Written by Michael Gingold
Wednesday, 15 August 2012 15:03



Most screen heroines who move into haunted houses do so without knowledge of their spooked histories, or in spite of them. In *THE AWAKENING*, opening this Friday, August 13 from Cohen Media Group, Florence Cathcart arrives at a post-WWI boarding school allegedly inhabited by a child's ghost for the express purpose of debunking those rumors. It's a compelling part given memorable life by acclaimed actress Rebecca Hall, taking her first lead in a genre film.

The daughter of Royal Shakespeare Company founder Sir Peter Hall, she previously dabbled in the occult via supporting roles in Christopher Nolan's *THE PRESTIGE* and the 2009 adaptation of *DORIAN GRAY* while also winning attention for films as diverse as Woody Allen's *VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA*, *FROST/NIXON* and *THE TOWN*. *THE AWAKENING* (see our review [here](#)) affords Hall one of her and the genre's most complex roles yet, as Florence's investigation of Rookford School's specter challenges her long-held beliefs and causes her to realize unsettling truths about herself.

FANGORIA: Is *THE AWAKENING* the first lead you've been offered in a film of this type?

REBECCA HALL: No, I've been offered horror movies before, but I didn't feel the parts were strong enough or the story interesting enough to take those, and this one was. I didn't set out to make a horror movie *per se*; I'm just interested in playing characters that are interesting to me. And this one was, so I thought, "Great."



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FANG: What was it about Florence in particular that appealed to you?

HALL: It was a combination of things: I liked her smarts, I liked her attitude and she's quite an attractive persona. But she's also complicated and damaged and frail, and when you scratch the surface a bit, she's not everything that she appears to be.

FANG: That's one of the interesting components of the character, and without giving too much away, how did you approach playing the hidden side of the character without revealing too much early on?

HALL: It was quite a sort of tightrope to walk. Part of me was very aware that it had an intricate plot, and should stand up to a second viewing. As in, there should be all sorts of things the audience can pick up on the second time they view it, so there was an element of wanting to lay those foundations as well as playing what was on the surface, and trying to balance it so we weren't giving away too much while giving away enough. Keeping that balance was very tricky, and kept in check by Nick, the director. He knew exactly the tone and pitch every scene should be, and would modulate me accordingly.

FANG: How was it working with Nick Murphy in general?

HALL: Really great. I liked him from the minute I met him. The jury was out at first about whether I was going to take the job; it was an interesting script, but I thought, "First-time film director, he's made a great bit of television, but..." Then I went to have lunch with him, and within five minutes I thought, "I want to make a movie with this guy," because he has such a sort of intoxicating enthusiasm and passion for what he does. I thought that would translate into a good film, and I think I was right. I hope I was right [*laughs*].

FANG: Was the subject matter something that interested you?

HALL: I think inasmuch as it interests anyone. I wouldn't say it's something I'm particularly nerdy or obsessive about, but it is interesting. I've always been intrigued by ghost stories, because they're an important way to discuss mortality and spirituality and grief and catharsis

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and all these different, very real, very powerful aspects of human experience.

FANG: On a personal level, would you consider yourself a believer or a skeptic when it comes to the supernatural?

HALL: I would consider myself a healthy agnostic. I'm neither skeptical nor a true believer. I don't know [if such things exist], but I'd really like it to be true, because that's far more interesting!

FANG: Did you do any research into the various types of equipment that Florence uses in the film?

HALL: I did [*laughs*], and I'm laughing because this is a bit like the day when you take an apple in to the teacher... My usual three months of prep that I do before a movie starts involves lots of sort of nerdy research, some of which I'm willing to talk about and some of which I won't. But part of it here was to look up the first Edison sound recorder and all the other things that were mentioned in the script, and find out the history of this machinery and whatever. And to my great shock, nothing that was mentioned in the script came up as being historically accurate. I got really baffled by this, and called up Nick Murphy and was like, "But...but...that's not...," and he was like, 'I know, you need to calm down and stop being so crazy. I made it up!' [*Laughs*] And I was like, "Oh. Yeah, you're right, I'm gonna stop that now."

FANG: What about the ghosts themselves? Were most of the special FX done live on set as opposed to being added digitally later?

HALL: Yeah; this was done on a shoestring, just a small group of us on location in Scotland making this, and there were no special effects, nothing. A couple of little things were obviously added in postproduction, but we all mucked in; when you see me being dragged through the mud, I'm being dragged through the mud.

FANG: Did that make it easier to get into the headspace of your character's fear?

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HALL: Well, it's obviously a lot easier to get scared when you're running through an actual woods as opposed to staring at a greenscreen and imagining you're there. At the same time, you might be running through the woods, but you're never far away from 20 people with makeup brushes and lighting rigs, eating sandwiches, drinking tea and chatting about football, so you come up against challenges that way.

FANG: You have a couple of great co-stars in THE AWAKENING; can you first talk about working with HARRY POTTER's Imelda Staunton?

HALL: She might be one of the funniest people I've ever met in my life. She has a wicked, wicked sense of humor and made me cry on several occasions from laughing so hard, at times I really shouldn't have been [*laughs*]. She's brilliant. I found her to be very inspiring, actually. She has always done things I admire, the way she juggles having the kind of career she wants, doing theater and film and all these different things. I'm in constant respect for her.

FANG: How about Dominic West, who plays the headmaster?

HALL: Dominic is also a very, very funny person. In fact, whoever put the three of us in a room together and told us to act seriously needed his head examined. We kind of became hysterical children [*laughs*], but he's great. He's very bold, Dominic. He doesn't really filter himself; he's kind of game for anything, and is very trusting. And that's all you can dream of with an actor you're working with, because the majority of what we do is about just being game for stuff.



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FANG: I was especially taken by your early scenes with West; not all horror films have characters as intelligent as this one, and to see you and him kind of intellectually sparring was intriguing to watch before the supernatural stuff gets started.

HALL: Yeah, that was one of the things that appealed to me about doing the film. Very much so.

FANG: And here's the question that gets asked of anyone who does a film like this: You were shooting a ghost story on location in a big old house; did anything spooky happen in real life during production?

HALL: No, no. I get asked that a lot, and I really wish it had, but nothing. Nothing.

FANG: Are you a fan of this type of movie yourself?

HALL: I am, I am. Some of my favorite movies are horror films, though it's not quite as cookie-cutter as I like them because they're about horror, but a lot of genre films are a way into talking about something much more universal and human. THE AWAKENING is ostensibly about ghosts, but it's really about loss and grief and knowing yourself and coming to terms with yourself. There's nothing supernatural about that.

FANG: Recently there's been a trend in movies focusing on people who are skeptical about the paranormal; RED LIGHTS is another recent example. Do you believe that reflects an unease or doubt about the world at large?

HALL: Yeah, I do, I do. I think that historically, culturally, we are interested in telling these narratives about human experience at times that are in flux. I don't believe it's a coincidence that there were higher records of spiritual/paranormal activity and seances just after WWI. In times that are hard financially and otherwise in society, the popular narratives will reflect that or start a dialogue about it in some respect.

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FANG: What do you have coming up?

HALL: I just wrapped a film called CLOSED CIRCUIT, a contemporary piece set in London about barristers. It's a political/legal thriller about contemporary events in England and deals with closed-court proceedings and terrorist cases. It's completely fascinating, I loved it. It's directed by John Crowley, Eric Bana's in it. I've got a five-part HBO/BBC adaptation of a novel called PARADE'S END that Tom Stoppard scripted, with Benedict Cumberbatch, that should be on TV over there [in the U.S.] quite soon. It's really good, and that's also, strangely, set in WWI in Britain. I've got a Stephen Frears film called LAY THE FAVORITE, based on a real person named Beth Raymer who was a professional sports gambler, that'll be coming out there soon. And I'm in the middle of shooting IRON MAN 3.

FANG: Can you tell us a little about your part in IRON MAN 3?

HALL: No [*laughs*]. I'm not allowed to tell you anything. Sorry!

FANG: Do you think you might work with Nick Murphy again?

HALL: Oh, happily! In a heartbeat. He's already made another film [the cop thriller BLOOD] that's in postproduction right now. He didn't ask me to be in it; he said he had made this movie which was mostly about a girl, and now he's done a really boy-heavy film.

FANG: Have you talked at all about what project you might get back together on?

HALL: No, we haven't. I don't know, it would probably have to be Florence Cathcart becoming a proper Sherlock Holmes figure, debunking more ghost stories somewhere. But I doubt he'd be interested in doing that [*laughs*]!