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With the remake of Wes Craven’s A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET opening this Friday, April 30, the time is ripe for the two follow-ups with which Craven was directly involved to be revisited. Craven first returned as a writer and executive producer on 1987’s A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 3: DREAM WARRIORS, which features a strong cast and a number of bizarre special FX setpieces, and was the turning point for the highly successful franchise.

Kristen Parker (Patricia Arquette’s first major role) is terribly afraid of falling asleep because of the man with razor-sharp claws in her dreams. As Kristen drifts off into her nightmare, she discovers a lost girl abandoned at a dilapidated house. She grabs hold of the girl and flees when the villain suddenly finds them. Without warning, they find themselves trapped in a sludgy pool of blood with their tormentor right behind them.

Kristen screams, waking up with her wrists slit. No one believes her explanation about her attacker, and it is assumed she is suicidal. After being sent to a mental institution, she encounters other young patients who are having nightmares about the same menacing figure. Their doctors dismiss their claims as mass hysteria, except for one person: Nancy Thompson. Heather Langenkamp reprises her role as Nancy, who must help the teens fend off the monster she fought before, Freddy Krueger.

NIGHTMARE 3 clearly marks a shift in direction of the franchise. Listen closely to the original and second films when the protagonists mention Krueger: Nancy and NIGHTMARE 2’s Jesse fearfully refer to him as Fred, not Freddy. Before, he was a vicious, brutal child murderer; in part

three, Freddy (played, as always, by Robert Englund) now enjoys the thrill of the hunt, as if having fun, and throws in a joke before killing his prey. In one memorable sequence, patient Jennifer (Penelope Sudrow) is hopelessly watching TV in order to stay awake. Interviewer Dick Cavett transforms into Freddy and slashes his guest, Zsa Zsa Gabor. After grabbing Jennifer, Freddy mockingly welcomes her to prime time and smashes her head straight into the screen. Like the third ALIEN and GODFATHER movies, this film also distinguishes itself via the death of its returning protagonist.

Craven’s influence is clearly felt, even though NIGHTMARE 3’s directorial reins were passed to Chuck Russell. The latter and his screenwriting partner Frank Darabont contributed many of the elaborate dream scenarios that appear throughout the movie. At one point, in homage to Ray Harryhausen’s stop-motion classics, Freddy’s skeletal remains come back to life and attack his enemies. (The duo would later pay tribute to ’50s genre fare again with the remake of THE BLOB).

A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET 3: DREAM WARRIORS entertains with its effective mixture of horror and comedy, and stands as a worthy follow-up to the classic original. Seven years later, however, its creator would take the reins again for WES CRAVEN’S NEW NIGHTMARE, which stands out as the most ambitiously inventive entry in the franchise. This one employs unconventional storytelling, presenting a horror film within a horror film.

Actress Heather Langenkamp has been losing sleep because of threatening phone calls made to her private home. Doubts plague her mind as she assumes they’re being made by an obsessed fan, and she wonders if the terrifying nightmares she has been having are foreshadowing the near future. She also worries about her young son, Dylan (Miko Hughes), who has been acting strangely—almost behaving like the infamous malefactor from a certain movie of hers.

Heather then receives an offer from New Line topper Robert Shaye to play the lead in the company’s new Freddy flick. She should be joyous, or at least grateful, for the new job, but seems suspicious of Shaye’s nervous mannerisms. He has also been receiving intimidating phone messages from the same caller, and it seems Freddy Krueger has returned to haunt those responsible for making the original NIGHTMARE. In fact, an evil entity disguising itself as Freddy wants to spread its evil into the real world, and in order to prevent it from entering our realm, Heather has to become Nancy Thompson again. Since Nancy defeated the nightmare king in the movies, Heather has to draw strength from her fictional character, with Dylan’s innocent life at stake.

Craven masterfully blends realism and fantasy in NEW NIGHTMARE, while paying tribute to his 1984 classic. In one suspenseful sequence, Dylan is rushed to the hospital with his babysitter, Julie (Tracy Middendorf). After being drugged by the nurses, Dylan suddenly sees Freddy viciously murdering Julie right in front of him. The babysitter’s bloody death on the hospital ceiling is a terrifying reenactment of Tina’s death from the original.

Craven has been vocal over the years about his dislike for the comical turn his creation took; the dream demon had become a comedian, even cartoonish, as the sequels went on. With NEW NIGHTMARE, he revisits the franchise to bring his creation back to his earliest intentions. In a return to chilling form, Krueger is once again the depraved, perverted child-killer. Englund gets to show his range by not only revisiting the role that made him a genre star, but also playing his real-life, gentle self.

Frightening and remarkably intelligent, WES CRAVEN’S NEW NIGHTMARE is highly recommended. It not only redeems the series after a few lackluster sequels, it also broke new ground in the horror genre.

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