

Some “THING” Old, Some “THING” New: A First Report

Written by David Bertrand

Tuesday, 05 October 2010 09:03



The most treasured of all Antarctic deep-freeze creepfests, John Carpenter’s *THE THING*, is at last seeing a long-mooted follow-up courtesy of Universal Pictures. Not a remake or a reboot, but a prequel, whose final reel will end immediately where the Carpenter classic begins. So yes, we’ll finally get to witness first-hand the original discovery of the alien craft—seen only in silent, black-and-white video footage in Carpenter’s 1982 film—and experience the bloody events leading to the destruction of the Norwegian camp, from which the shapeshifting “thing” escaped to U.S. outpost #31 and its inhabitants, including pilot R.J. MacReady (Kurt Russell).

Without a confirmed release moniker—the working title for the new picture is, confusingly, also *THE THING*—Universal and director Matthijs van Heijningen Jr. have their work cut out for them. Though a box-office disappointment at the time, Carpenter’s movie is now considered a modern genre classic and one of the best remakes of all time. Its creature, able to replicate any living thing it comes into contact with and brought to life by the remarkable FX of then-22-year-old genius Rob Bottin, contributed to one of the most grotesque and icily paranoid horror films ever made. And now, the premise of an alien craft trapped under Antarctic ice millions of years before the Dawn of Man, thawed by a band of scientists and military men who can’t imagine the terrible menace they’re about to unleash, is clearly a concept too spectacular and terrifying not to revisit.



The new *THING*, currently set for release April 29, 2011, is the first feature by Dutch music-video and commercial director Matthijs van Heijningen Jr., son of producer Matthijs van Heijningen Sr. (whose credits include, among other things, Dick Maas’ 1983 cult item *THE LIFT*, about a possessed, murderous elevator!). Extremely enthusiastic when Fango visits the shoot

Some “THING” Old, Some “THING” New: A First Report

Written by David Bertrand

Tuesday, 05 October 2010 09:03

and bearing obvious admiration for Carpenter’s work, Heijningen has embraced every frame of the ’82 classic in his attempt to match its tone and vision. The cinematography by TAKEN’s Michel Abramovicz promises a classic, elegant but controlled look to match, without veering into a modern, washed-out digital-era sheen.

However, with a script by Eric Heisserer (of the much-maligned A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET remake), working off a discarded first draft by writer/producer Ron Moore (of the much-beloved BATTLESTAR GALACTICA), it’s reasonable to be timid about Universal’s latest venture into reboot territory. But there’s plenty of good news: For one, the prequel stays frighteningly true to the world established in Carpenter’s film, with production design carefully emulating the original, including spot-on recreations of the original Norwegian camp, only previously seen as a burnt-out husk by MacReady and Copper (Richard Dysart). Director Heijningen explains how they studied Carpenter’s feature obsessively to get theirs right: “We photographed every inch of it. Every building, every bit of radio equipment is exactly similar to what’s in the first movie. We tried to find some original set designs, but they were all gone. We measured everything by eye.”



Thankfully, the film also features a camp full of Norwegian actors speaking their own native language (plus a handful of key leading roles given to Americans, a Dane and an Aussie to balance things out). And best of all, some location footage was filmed around Carpenter’s original isolated location of Stewart, British Columbia near the Alaskan border.

And the gore factor? Storyboards Fango witnesses of THE THING’s mutations and bodily takeovers look genuinely grotesque, inventive and amazing. Will these creations faithfully approximate or exceed Bottin’s barometer-shattering practical FX from three decades ago? That remains to be seen, but there’s a lot of promise, and the fact that this is a film made by admirers of the original is abundantly clear. Heijningen addresses the always-contentious issue of practical vs. digital FX—a particularly heated debate when discussing the original THING, widely touted as the finest example of what can be done with a little latex and a lot of

Some “THING” Old, Some “THING” New: A First Report

Written by David Bertrand

Tuesday, 05 October 2010 09:03

ingenuity—by stating simply, “The aim is to do as much practical as possible.”

For this task, he chose to go with FX wizards Alec Gillis and Tom Woodruff Jr. of Amalgamated Dynamics, Inc., veterans of several of the ALIEN and PREDATOR films, in particular because of one favorite sequence: “For ALIEN RESURRECTION,” Heijningen says, “They did all the mutations of Ripley in those big tubes, and I got to see them for real. I liked the texture of them, the reality. Their approach was the most convincing.” His reasons for preferring the physical method extend behind just aesthetic preference, however: “I love actors, but the moment you put a green tennis ball in front of them [as a reference point for a digital beast to be added later], they’re going to do all kinds of weird stuff. If I have a real monster in the room, they’ll act completely different. I’m as interested in the monsters as the reactions of the people. So, we do as much practical as possible and enhance in a digital way.”



Effects aside, the most contentious issue for THING fans is, perhaps oddly, the inclusion of women in the cast. The presence of gorgeous Mary Elizabeth Winstead (from DEATH PROOF and FINAL DESTINATION 3) as one of the leads is sure easy on the eyes, but Carpenter’s film has long been renowned as that rare feature film with an exclusively male cast, in stubborn opposition to all common marketing logic. This conceit is discarded here. Meanwhile, Australian actor Joel Edgerton (on view this year in the highly regarded Down Under crime drama ANIMAL KINGDOM) essays Carter, a somewhat similar role to Russell’s MacReady, with LOST’s Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje as his counterpart—drawing inevitable comparisons to Keith David’s role of Childs in the original. Heijningen is quick to address such suspicions, as well as his thoughts on the female lead: “For the casting of the Americans, I wanted to do a little MacReady tribute in the form of Joel as a pilot. But if we tried to copy Kurt Russell in any way, I think we would lose it. That’s a lost battle.” Stemming from this thought came the idea of Winstead’s character, paleontologist Kate Lloyd: “My admiration for ALIENS is sort of how this Ripley-esque character came into play.” The chance to see Winstead strapped with a flamethrower, à la Sigourney Weaver, should be a welcome one indeed.

Some “THING” Old, Some “THING” New: A First Report

Written by David Bertrand

Tuesday, 05 October 2010 09:03

With snow, paranoia, flamethrowers and vicious bodily invasions by an identity-snatching alien being, the new movie has two goals: to scare the bejeezus out of us and to honor the legacy of Carpenter’s original film. If this THING can achieve both ambitions, it will truly be a treat. Still no word if there’ll be any bottles of J&B on view...



{jcomments on}