

## The Man Behind the “MONSTERS”

Written by Michael Gingold  
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Gareth Edwards (pictured left) isn't the first special FX artist to turn director, but the story behind his debut feature *MONSTERS* is certainly unique. Rather than pursue the helm of a big-budget studio feature for his first time out, Edwards adopted a DIY approach, shooting *MONSTERS* with a tiny crew and two lead actors on south-of-the-border locations, drafting local residents as supporting cast, and then later applying his digital wizardry to the footage.

The result has won raves from critics since it began appearing at festivals earlier this year, and the movie is now in the midst of an expanding U.S. theatrical release from Magnolia Pictures' Magnet Releasing arm (go [here](#) for dates and venues, and see our review [here](#)). The story follows an American photojournalist (Scoot McNairy) as he escorts his publisher's daughter (Whitney Able, McNairy's real-life girlfriend) through Mexican territory that has been quarantined walled off due to the presence of large, tentacled alien creatures that hitched a ride back to Earth on a NASA space probe.

**FANGORIA:** How did you arrive at the storyline for *MONSTERS*?

**GARETH EDWARDS:** It was really a concept in search of a story, to start with. I was on holiday and watching these fishermen pull in a net from the ocean, and I just thought, "Wouldn't it be funny if when they finally pulled this thing out of the water, it was this massive sea creature?" Obviously, the men weren't actually reacting to anything, just pulling the net in, and it was like, "That would make an interesting premise—you have this crazy situation, but nobody reacts to it at all; it's years down the line, and everyone's gotten used to it."



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**FANG:** How much of the movie was scripted, in terms of both the dialogue and the action?

**EDWARDS:** The elements we didn't have locked down were the dialogue and the environments. But the story was completely predetermined. Every major moment in the film was written; it was just that the actors were completely free regarding how they said or did or reacted to things. If you lay out a story on a table, it sort of breaks down into two layers: There are the physical events that happen, and there are the emotional changes and things that are revealed. In a normal screenplay, at some point you would lock them together and say, “OK, when he's in the bar talking to the journalist, this is when we learn that he's very insecure,” or something. But [in this case] we didn't know whether it would be really noisy once we were in the bar, whether it would be impossible to have a private conversation, or if someone in the background would be doing such things that the scene couldn't emotionally go in that direction.

So I printed out the treatment in two different colors, black and blue. Black was physical things, and blue was emotional stuff. Every time we did a scene, we would look through the blue pages, and we would know that “This reveal about your character can come any time after *this* point in the story, but it's gotta come before

*this*

point.” So it would slide around, and we would shoot some of those emotional moments two or three times in different places; then in the edit, we would select the place where it felt most right.

**FANG:** Was there an element of danger on any of your locations?

**EDWARDS:** Sometimes, we had to be more careful. There's a scene with guys with guns at a campfire in the middle of the jungle, and we were told in no uncertain terms, “You do not go into the forested areas of Mexico with everyone dressed up in military gear with weapons.” We had to do that on private land, so it became more like a typical dramatic shoot in the sense that we had to plan it. And at one of the towns we turned up in...I always worry saying these sorts of things, because it makes it sound like Mexico and Guatemala are these really scary countries, and they're not at all, they're beautiful and the people are so friendly. But in this town, a week before we got there, someone had machine-gunned everyone in the café dead. We tried to keep that hidden from the actors so it wouldn't make them nervous. Then there was a prison break in Guatemala, and they decapitated a bunch of the prisoners. The local paper had it on the front page, these decapitated heads—and we were trying to keep that hidden from the actors as well [ *laughs*].

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One time I went to this hotel really late at night, and said to the lady who ran it, “Do you know where my room is?” And she said, “Yeah, it’s just down there, next to the…” Her English wasn’t great, but she said, “Next to the tigers.” I was thinking, “Oh, I wonder what she meant by that”; like, “Next to the *towels*,” you know? [*Laughs*] And then I got there, and there was literally a tiger enclosure, and my room was part of it. Apparently, exotic pets are like a sign of social status, so it was a real honor, because I was the director, to be a part of the tiger enclosure—and I spent the whole night shitting myself. Hoisting the camera had made my back really bad, so I would limp when I was walking, and I could see the tigers watching me like I was an antelope—“When I get out of here, I’m gonna get that one.” Scoot played off it too and teased me, and scratched the window at night.

**FANG:** How did you wind up casting your two leads?

**EDWARDS:** It was very simple: We didn’t have any auditions. As part of the process of figuring out how we were gonna do the film, Vertigo, which financed and produced it, said, “You should watch this film we’re distributing called IN SEARCH OF A MIDNIGHT KISS. It was made for \$15,000,” or whatever. Scoot starred in it, and it struck me that he was a brilliant actor, but I really wanted a couple. They made a phone call about him doing another project, and during that they asked, “He doesn’t have a girlfriend, does he?” and he was like, “Yeah, and she’s an actress.” He sent her picture thinking that would seal the deal, because Whitney’s gorgeous, but I just thought, “Nah, she’s too good-looking,” and I didn’t want it to be this kind of Hollywood thing. But then I met her, and she was so not what I expected her to be. She was so down to earth and really keen to portray that as well, because she would get typecast as bimbos or bitches or whatever. So I thought, “If I can get just a piece of these two and their real personalities on screen, that would be fantastic.”



**FANG:** How about the monsters—who designed them?

**EDWARDS:** I did that, but it took me ages. During the whole process of filming and editing, I

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would do little doodles of the creatures, and if I liked one I would store it. When it came time to do all the CGI, I had thousands of sketches. A lot were absolute rubbish, but I took about 140 of my favorites and mounted them on a wall for the producers to check out. They looked at them all and were like, “Oh my God, there’s too many.” There was 20 minutes of silence where they just couldn’t pick one, and in the end I went, “Look, I think that one’s my favorite,” and they said, “OK, go with that.”

The idea was—and it’s actually in the film, very subtly—that if you ask any scientist about the most likely place you’d find alien life in our solar system, it would be a moon outside Jupiter called Europa. It has an ice surface, but it’s cracked and moving, so they know that inside is a molten core and a liquid ocean, and that’s exactly the same conditions that spawned life on Earth. So I looked at those volcanic vents, and the kind of life you get is crabs, crustaceans and cephalopods—octopi and squids. So I combined those two, and also bioluminescence, because in my mind, the creatures are attracted to light, and in their world the only light they’re able to see is other creatures. So when they see lights, especially on another planet, they’d think, “Hey, there’s another...hello!” and go over and see what it is—which is why they attack the cities at night. So I had lots of silly extra details worked out.

**FANG:** So during shooting, the actors had to react to creatures whose look hadn’t been determined yet.

**EDWARDS:** Exactly—they would ask me what the hell they were looking at, and I’d have to invent something. Originally, it was just going to be one giant tentacle; we were going to have the story take place along a river, and you were never gonna see these things unless you were near the water and this long, massive tentacle would come out. But that got restrictive; it meant that as long as the characters stayed away from the river, they’d be fine. So then I had to give them legs and things like that.

If you look at the dailies of [the climactic scene involving the creatures], the actors are freezing their asses off. It was really cold that night, and every time I said “Cut,” they would burst into laughter. There are some very intimate moments where literally, a few frames later, they were just bursting into hysterics, because they felt so weird doing it. But in the film, you can’t tell at all. Also, everyone would be a bit concerned about “Where do I look?” And it was more a case of, “Look wherever you want, and I’ll put it there.”

**FANG:** MONSTERS is a little bit reminiscent of DISTRICT 9. Did you intend for your movie to

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be any kind of social commentary?

**EDWARDS:** It wasn't my mission to make a political film or anything like that, but it was a happy byproduct of using real-world situations to help explain or make the fantasy more believable. If you set out to do something too political, it would just be boring, but I did want to make the film work on different levels and not just be a lot of running and screaming and stuff. My favorite films are things like *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*, which was all about the McCarthy witchhunts—but it's also about aliens invading, and works completely on that level. So it's like a happy accident that you can read other things into it. I've never been to Mexico, so I wasn't sitting at home going, “How can I address the Mexican border issue? I know, I'll make a monster movie!” It just kind of came out, because I was pulling from real-world situations, trying to get good performances out of the non-professional actors. We had to talk about real things, because otherwise they wouldn't understand what the hell I was going on about, and that way I'd get genuine performances out of them. There's the scene around the campfire where they're talking about UFOs, ghosts, the Mexican earthquake and all those sorts of things, and then we used their answers out of context with the questions Scoot asks later. They knew we were doing it, so it wasn't like we were tricking them or anything, but it was the best way to get natural reactions.

**FANG:** What do you have coming up next?

**EDWARDS:** I'm in the process of finding the time to try and write the next idea. No one warns you about how little time you have. When you finally finish a film, you're completely exhausted, and then you think, “Great! I can go on holiday.” But then it's like, “Nuh-uh” [ *laughs* ]. Now you have to do all the festivals and the publicity and everything. And that's great, because it's a good sign and I'm very happy to be doing all that—but I just wasn't planning on so little free time. So as soon as I can fit stuff in, I'm writing. I'm not allowed to talk about it, but I can say it's science fiction—and it's more ambitious than *MONSTERS*.

*Read more of Edwards' comments about MONSTERS in Fango #298, on sale now.*

{comments on}