That Justin Bieber lookalike staring balefully out from INSIDIOUS’ poster and newspaper ads may be the central advertising figure, but he’s not really the movie’s star. Holding the center with compelling and highly sympathetic performances are Patrick Wilson and Rose Byrne, playing the parents of that very afflicted boy.

As Josh and Renai Lambert, who are confronted by not only the mysterious coma their son Dalton (Ty Simpkins) has fallen into but fearsome spirits that begin plaguing their lives, Wilson and Byrne enact conflicting roles of skeptic and desperate believer in the supernatural. That adds an extra level of drama to INSIDIOUS, which is one of the most genuinely frightening features in a while—a true cover-your-eyes-’cause-you-don’t-wanna-see-what’s-coming-next experience (see our full review here). The movie opens nationwide today from FilmDistrict, and Fango spoke to Wilson and Byrne in New York about their roles.

FANGORIA: INSIDIOUS creators James Wan and Leigh Whannell were previously best-known for SAW, which is a very different kind of horror film. Did that color your expectations when you first read the INSIDIOUS script?

PATRICK WILSON: It did made me think, “Wow, they know the genre—they know how to push the boundaries.” You think about when SAW came out and what that spawned, from all the sequels to HOSTEL to everything else; they were at the forefront of that. I did see the first one, and I dug it, so that made me excited. Because if you’re going to break out into a new genre, which was what I was doing here, I wanted it to be with somebody who I knew I was comfortable with and successful at that. And between them, and [producers] Jason [Blum] and Oren [Peli], producer and director of PARANORMAL ACTIVITY, I felt like, “OK, they know what

they’re doing!” [*Laughs*]

ROSE BYRNE: I can’t watch those films; they go a little too far for me, but I knew [SAW] obviously had been such a huge success that they made for nothing, and that they were the new generation of horror filmmakers. I read the script and really liked it and loved the character, and knew that Patrick was possibly attached, and I was like, “This could be really, really cool.” It was very different from anything I had ever done. I did 28 WEEKS LATER, which was a lot more gory and action-packed, whereas this was two houses, four characters and this woman’s mental breakdown. I had never been offered something like this before, so I was really into it, and knew that they would be also; they had complete autonomy over the project, which was something they made the active decision to do. It was on a very, very small budget, and we shot it in 22 days. So that was exciting to me, because it was these guys who are masters and wanted to go back to where they started. In a new sense, kind of a classic horror sense.

FANG: That old-fashioned approach meant the film’s FX are largely physical and practical, rather than depending on CGI. Did that help your performances?

WILSON: Oh, yeah. Look, I’m a child of STAR WARS, and who are you gonna take? Greedo in his mask or Jar Jar Binks in CGI? Sorry, I want makeup. I want to see a Tuscan Raider, that’s what I like. I want to see somebody working in makeup. Justin [Raleigh], who did the red-faced demon, did costumes for WATCHMEN, so I’ve known him for a long time. I love that stuff. To me, that’s exciting, that’s real. It’s organic. I can look at you, and you’re creepy. There are one or two [digital] effects thrown in, but very minimal.

BYRNE: It really was helpful. It was basically an instinctual reaction to this person coming out of the cupboard or that person behind the crib or whatever; there was really nothing I had to manifest in my own head.

FANG: A number of INSIDIOUS’ scares are crucially dependent on timing; did those present a challenge?

WILSON: It was very technical, like doing a comedy in some ways. You have to know exactly how you want to shoot it, and when the scares come—they were very conscious of having no false scares—and be very confident in the storytelling. For those moments where there were things like demons behind me, it had to be very precise. But I love that. I love finding my way through the technical side of it and then figuring out how to act within that. That’s exciting to me.

BYRNE: That stuff was tricky, and I remember [one particular scene] was a huge beat in the film and the first big scare for the audience, so that was really, really hard—I wanted to get that perfectly right. But I love doing that sort of stuff—it was so scary, but it was lots of fun.

FANG: Patrick, some of your key scenes are pretty much just you in a dark room; was it difficult to get into the right mindset with such a simple setup around you?

WILSON: I had to be clear with what we were doing: “OK, I’m lost, I can’t see anything, I’m going to go here, go there.” That was something I had to be very technical about, because yeah, when the lights came on, I was in the basement of an old abandoned building with black felt and garbage bags up over the windows to black everything out.

FANG: Some of the more extreme scenes, like the seance with all the wind and flashing lights, seem like they must have been physically difficult to do.

WILSON: That was bizarre. Anytime you’re using strobe lights, they’ve got to put signs up front to make sure no one’s gonna have a stroke or something; it can be very jarring. That was no joke—it was really freaky and intense. But luckily, my character was going through it just like I would, saying, “What the hell is going on here?” So that helped.

BYRNE: It was a bit cramped and sweaty in that tiny room, and obviously there was the crew in there too. Long sequences like that can be exhausting, but generally, it was fine. Everyone had a good disposition and morale, and it was all fun. Patrick was great, Lin Shaye was great and the boys were really terrific. So I looked forward to work, I really did. Despite the drain and strain and screaming and terror and all that stuff, it was fun.

FANG: Speaking of working with the child actors, how did you approach the parental side of your roles?

WILSON: I have two little boys, so that part was easy, and exciting. Because I feel like [a child in danger is] something you can really lock into, you know—there’s something very human about it. I could understand that predicament very easily.

BYRNE: Since Patrick has children, I asked him a lot about that. And we just tried to be careful in terms of charting the technical stuff, in terms of where the kids were. When the boy was sick in the hospital, that was probably the hardest part—finding out that news, because to a parent, anything like that is obviously a horror unto itself. All that stuff was pretty hard.

FANG: Would you like to elaborate on working with your co-stars? Rose, you had a pair of fellow Australians in the cast, screenwriter Whannell and Angus Sampson as the comic-relief ghost hunters.

BYRNE: I knew Leigh and James were Australian, but we had never crossed paths before, really. I realized Leigh and I have a few mutual friends, because I did know Angus. Leigh is really very funny; he just cracks me up, and I told him he has to write a comedy for me [*laughs*

]—a one-woman comedy. I was nervous as to how their characters would play in the film, because its obviously such a tonal shift, but it’s quite seamless. And I think the audience needs that release, to have a laugh, because it’s so tense up until that point.

And it works very well.

WILSON: Leigh and Angus were just ridiculously hilarious together. I like that; I enjoy the weirdness. I like humor in horror movies, I like humor in action movies; you have to have that other side, you know? Sam Raimi does it masterfully. It gives the audience a chance to relax a little bit.

It was a great group, going down the line. Rose is just awesome, and we hit it off from day one. I knew we could have a laugh together, and she’s incredibly talented—and not hard to look at. We had a wonderful time. Lin is just salt-of-the-earth, with such great ideas for what she wanted her character to be. On the page, it could have been the Zelda Rubinstein role from POLTERGEIST, kind of a creepy woman, and Lin wanted to play her as grounded and understanding and nice and sweet, like this ray of light that comes in to help. And I loved that. Barbara Hershey is an awesome actress, and having her playing the mother was just a treat. They assembled a great cast, and that tells you something about the power of the script, because when you’re slamming a movie out, for not a lot of money in a few weeks, you’ve got to be game for it.

FANG: Did you feel any pressure due to the tight shooting schedule?

WILSON: A little, yeah. We had long days and a lot of pages a day, and we didn’t get a lot of coverage or rehearsal. But luckily, the benefit of doing a movie that’s not on a big budget—and the reason it’s usually done like that—is so if the filmmakers feel like, ‘OK, we’re not going to sacrifice anything on screen,’ which I don’t think they have, it lets them have complete control. So we were in good hands. James knew what he was doing and we had good producers, so we never felt like we were cutting corners for the sake of money, or “Come on, we’ve gotta go!” Albert Cho was our AD, and that’s one of the toughest jobs on a film set—putting it together and trying to make your day on a certain budget—and we had done LAKEVIEW TERRACE together, so I knew he was great with organizing schedules and stuff. You just have to have complete teamwork. Everyone’s got to aim for the same goal, believe in the script and figure out a way to get it done.

FANG: Both of you have done big-scale science fiction/fantasy films; how do those experiences compare to doing a small-scale movie like INSIDIOUS?

WILSON: On a longer shoot, you just have to keep focused on the story you’re trying to tell. On WATCHMEN, we took six months to shoot the movie, and we had to be that much more concentrated. Because just as a human being, the changes you go through over six months—how do you maintain your character? That becomes much more difficult on a big-budget movie, because you’re shooting everything out of sequence, and it’s like, “OK, what am I doing? Where’s the character coming from? What scene are we doing, and what comes before it?” You’re always going back to your script. Luckily, on WATCHMEN, we had pretty great source material; that was tremendously helpful. On INSIDIOUS, we did shoot out of sequence, but we did film the two houses in order. So the first part of the movie we shot over the first week and a half, and the second part the next week and a half. That helped.

BYRNE: At the end of the day, it’s you, the director, the other actors, the script, really, whether you’re on INSIDIOUS or on X-MEN [FIRST CLASS, in which she plays Dr. Moira McTaggert]. Other than that, it’s just all the stuff around you—it’s more time, more space in your trailer, more opinions. Usually, with a studio it’s a longer process because it’s more political, whereas on something like INSIDIOUS, they had autonomy on the project, they had final cut, they didn’t have anyone coming in giving notes or anything like that. That’s the big divider, I would say.

{jcomments on}