

Will Smith tackles new worlds with sci-fi chiller 'I Am Legend'

by James Hebert

BEVERLY HILLS - There's a disquieting silence to the bleakest scenes of "I Am Legend," and one reason is that Will Smith just won't shut up.

It so happens the actor is talking to himself, although the chattering is made manifest not by moving lips but by a suffering soul.

NO FEAR - Will Smith has only his dog for company as he strolls the deserted streets of New York in the sci-fi thriller 'I Am Legend.' CNS Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Smith plays the last man on Earth in the new sci-fi film based on the Richard Matheson book. Since his character, Robert Neville, has no one to communicate with, the conversation takes place exclusively in his brain.

Believe it or not, it's a real conversation - of sorts. Smith says he scripted a series of silent, two-way talks with himself, an exercise that helps give Neville's every move a sense of haunted authenticity. (The actor got the idea from talking to former POWs about how they coped with aloneness.)

"So there are pages and pages of dialogue that I have going on inside my head in every scene, in order to give life to the performance," says Smith, whose rumbling-thunder voice makes you wonder how all that gray-matter gab failed to leak out his ears. "There's this huge internal dialogue going on that never actually comes out in anything but behavior."

In the film, Smith's drawn face and dulled eyes project Neville's desperate isolation. But the movie's oppressive sense of the solitary comes across just as starkly in scenes of New York's eerily deserted streets.

Together, they demonstrate that if you want to get your dread on, the terror of abandonment is one of movies' most potent tropes.

That fright has driven films as diverse as "Alien," "Open Water" and "AI: Artificial Intelligence." But "I Am Legend" takes it further: As far as Neville knows, he's the only person left untouched by a worldwide viral plague.

Of course, he's not totally alone. There's his trusty dog. Then there are the legions of creepy demons hiding in the shadows. (The virus killed most people, but turned a few into flesh-eaters who hunt by night.)

"It is such a primal concept: The idea of being alone, and the fear of the dark," Smith is saying to a roomful of reporters at an L.A. hotel. "Every 4-year-old has thought about that idea of being separated from their family, and being alone and in the dark. And what comes out of the dark."

A little later, in one-to-one conversation (real, not mental) in an upstairs suite, Smith talks further about "stories that exist in our DNA. Stories that are ingrained into the experience of being human - the Jungian idea of the collective unconscious."

"This one," he says, "sits firmly in that intellectual, emotional, biological story space."

NO SOLITARY MAN

Smith wouldn't necessarily strike anyone as the first choice to play a mute loner. The last man on this film's version of our planet is possibly the most gregarious man on the actual Earth.

His enduring image is as the cocky, wiseguy hero of massive movies like "Independence Day" (1996) and "Men in Black" (1997), although the Grammy-winning former rapper's startling range also takes in Oscar-nominated turns as the iconic boxer in 2002's "Ali" and as a broke, struggling dad in last year's "The Pursuit of Happyness."

In conversation, he's much more the genial guy's guy than the brooding thesp, indulging in a frequent, booming laugh as he perches his lanky frame at sofa's edge.

Smith's easy confidence turns out to be one reason he's a good fit for Neville. If the movie's main character is a solitary man, he's also impressively self-sufficient, hunting deer in Central Park, setting elaborate traps for the phantom creatures and building a sophisticated lab to seek a cure for the virus.

Smith, a voracious reader (favorite book of late: "The Tao of Physics") and gadget nut, shares some of that supreme self-reliance. At least in his mind.

He is reminded of another conversation, nearly a decade back, in which he talked of how the "arrogant guy" component of his personality was constantly warring with his rational side, goading him to try the impossible. (Voices in his head are not entirely a new thing, it's clear.)

His willingness to take a flying leap is partly why he signed up for "I Am Legend" in the first place. While the movie has the sci-fi environs and the creature factor of something like "Independence Day," it has none of that movie's comic snap.

"The idea sort of suppressed it," Smith says of the new film's apocalyptic ethos. "There wasn't nothin' funny."

Still, Smith felt it was as good a time as any to go against the holiday-blockbuster grain.

"I had a friend of mine say something when I started 'I Am Legend' that really stuck with me," says Smith. "He said, 'You have earned the right to fail.' And I just thought that was a very interesting way to look at the challenges and risks of things I want to do with my career at this point.

"The approach to this film was much more risky, much more aggressively character-oriented than you would normally make this kind of movie," he says. "There is a much safer way to make 'I Am Legend,' just high-fivin' and heading away with huge international success."

Finding ways to convey a fully realized character with virtually no one else to play off, and almost no dialogue to speak, seemed a good way to risk a major-league whiff. Particularly since it invited comparison to Tom Hanks' turn as a man stranded on an island in 2000's "Cast Away," for which the actor earned an Oscar nomination.

But "Tom Hanks did it at a time when he really didn't have a map," says Smith. "So I had the benefit of Tom Hanks' map to be able to create.

"Like, I have monsters. He had Wilson, right?"

Smith pauses for a laugh at the contrast between his zombie foes and Hanks' "companion," a Wilson volleyball.

"I would say it was probably equally difficult. But what Tom Hanks did was much more revolutionary."

RECURRING THEMES

As groundbreaking as that performance might have been, it still played on age-old archetypes of abandonment and alienation. And such themes, though elemental and timeless, are frequently tied up with more immediate, explicit anxieties. It's no fluke that Matheson wrote "I Am Legend" when he did, or that it's being adapted (again) now.

"Matheson's novel was published in 1954, at the height of the Cold War, and the first movie version, 'The Last Man on Earth,' came out the next year," points out Carl Royer, who wrote the book "The Spectacle of Isolation in Horror Films" with his wife, Diana.

"'Omega Man' (an adaptation starring Charlton Heston) was made in 1971. We were still in the Cold War and in Vietnam; people thought society was disintegrating.

"And now here we are in 2007 and the world actually is disintegrating. It's almost an archetypal story that plays on humans' fear of isolation and need to contain their environment."

Matheson's book, whose villains were old-school vampires rather than generic ghouls, went deeper than the movie with its implicit commentary on discrimination and social hierarchies - the way they can create more metaphorical forms of isolation.

"The key to the novel is the revelation that Robert Neville has at the end, that he is, in fact, the monster, because the so-called vampires are the new majority and they look at him in fear and terror," says Royer. "So then he takes an overdose of pills and dies, realizing that he'll be the new bogeyman."

While the new "I Am Legend" hints at those more subtle themes, its ending is (spoiler alert!) somewhat different, and it mostly sheds that level of nuance in favor of a straight-up monster story.

"We went back and forth on that, to tell you the truth," says Akiva Goldsman, a co-writer and producer of the movie (and an Oscar-winner for scripting 2001's "A Beautiful Mind").

"We shot material that was like that, and cut more of it in, and cut more of it out. We ended up going with what I'd call the 'Omega Man' structure, which keeps the idea that these people are mutated into something

that is not so human anymore.

"But if you really look around the movie, there are indicators of the other stuff. It's floating around in there. My favorite little teeny piece of it is when (the character Anna, played by Alice Braga) looks at the wall and says, 'Did they all die?' You see all these people Neville has experimented on, all these head shots."

Those photos are also a startling and sobering echo of the heartbreaking fliers posted in New York after the 2001 terrorist attacks, with their images of friends and lovers, husbands and wives who never made it home.

Smith agrees that "I Am Legend" indirectly references that tragedy, in ways not always so subtle. Neville, a virologist who tried in vain to stop the virus, refers several times to the New York origins of the disaster as "ground zero."

"It's the danger that human beings can find ourselves in so quickly," Smith says, commenting on the common thread. "And the thing I really connected to with this movie and those ideas is how we bring it on ourselves."

"It's one thing when nature just comes in and throws a curveball. But what I thought was interesting and scary and exciting about this concept is the man-made element of the virus."

In shooting the movie, Smith had a far less perilous but still vexing kind of epidemic to deal with.

The production company managed to shut down massive swaths of busy midtown Manhattan for the scenes of Neville traveling down deserted avenues. When the takes ended, Smith says, thousands of onlookers - just out of camera range - mostly erupted into cheers.

Some harried and irate New Yorkers, though, saw fit to greet Smith with single-digit salutes.

"When I went to sleep at night while we were working on 'I Am Legend,'" Smith half-jokes, "I wasn't counting sheep. I was counting middle fingers."

Sounds like the kind of thing that might make anyone talk to himself.

Will Smith tackles new worlds with sci-fi chiller 'I Am Legend' by James Hebert