

Film Close-Up: Robert Carlyle

by Joey_Berlin

With a grungy visual style and an intelligent story, "28 Days Later" established a bold new breed of zombie horror in 2003. The frightfully good sci-fi splatterfest is returning with a sequel, "28 Weeks Later," starring Scottish actor Robert Carlyle.

ROBERT CARLYLE - Robert Carlyle stars in the sci-fi thriller '28 Weeks Later.' CNS Photo courtesy of Fox Atomic.

The new film is set several months after the first, in which Britain was decimated by a mysterious virus that sends victims into a ferocious, flesh-ripping rage. Declaring the zombie war over, the U.S. military has established a safe "green zone" in an isolated part of central London, and Carlyle is among the first to move back to the abandoned city with his family.

The movie reunites Carlyle with Danny Boyle, who directed the first film and produced the sequel, more than a decade after they first worked together. Carlyle's breakthrough role was the thug Begbie in Boyle's 1996 movie "Trainspotting," and they also collaborated in 2000 on "The Beach."

Carlyle's zig-zag path to stardom also included a key role in "The Full Monty," James Bond's nemesis in "The World is Not Enough" and an antagonist in the dragon adventure "Eragon." A 46-year-old father of three young children, he is presently filming "The Meat Trade," a darkly comic thriller with Colin Firth.

Q: Were you surprised with what your character does in "28 Weeks Later" when you read the script?

A: Obviously I have known Andrew (Macdonald, a producer of the film) and Danny for years and years and worked together many times. So that was the first thing that I thought, there's no way that Danny and Andrew would throw out a sequel for the sake of making a sequel. There would have to be something in there, within the character. And when I read the two major decisions that Don has to make, that's gold dust for an actor when you know that the audience will go home and talk about it, especially couples.

Q: Among your acting peers, is there a stigma associated with horror movies? How do you make sure you are in a really good one, as opposed to something trashy?

A: I couldn't sit here and rate a horror script on whether it would work or not. But there's certain things that identify it as being quite keen, those being suspense and apprehension. I think Hitchcock was into building, not in a horror sense, the suspense. Build the suspense and build the apprehension. Once that match has been lit and that candle is lit in that little cottage and music comes in underneath and you think something very bad is going to happen, that is a crucial point in a film. You have to deliver once you've promised that.

Q: Your transformation in the film, after you kiss your wife, makes quite an impact.

A: Yeah, the scariest moment in it for me was the moment he confronts his wife. That was fear, perhaps I couldn't play that scene. It was funny when I watched it back, it was really small. It was that kind of emotional fear. Is she going to breathe? How is she going to react? But in terms of being scared, that was probably the scariest moment in the film for me.

Q: How did you get ready for your violent transformation? How did you work yourself up for it mentally?

A: That sequence was probably four or five hours, and I had a headache for two days afterward from smashing my head off things. There's no direction, you see. It's like, do what you want to do. All it says in the script is, "Don transforms," so all of these moments were built up over four or five hours. We all have it in us, all of us. In most walks of life you have to bury it, rage I mean, but as an actor you have to find it. I think anything that you're asked to do is in you, you just have to find it.

Q: What was the make-up like, and did the special contact lenses kill your eyes?

A: The contacts were the worst part of it, yeah, it was terrible. The worst part about wearing these things is when you walk in the studio it's very hot, so they get stuck to your eyes and you have to get constant eye drops and stuff. In "Eragon", in fact, a couple of years ago I got scratched on the eye. They are a bit of a problem and I can't keep them in for too long.

Q: How do you describe director Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's approach to horror films?

A: I certainly enjoyed working with him. He's a very stylish director and he knows what he wants. He's very quiet. He's one of the most quiet directors I've ever worked with. I've never seen that approach before.

Q: What was it like working with Mackintosh Muggleton, the boy who plays your son?

A: The first thing is, you have to be encouraging. That's the way to get any kind of performance from an actor, let alone children. Kids kind of humble you as an actor and I'm always aware of that, because they don't second-guess anything. They just go in and say it, whereas you're sitting in bed at night structuring this whole thing and they just walk on and say it. So you can learn from them in that respect, and I always take the opportunity to learn from children in terms of letting things go.

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