

Film Close-Up: John Cusack

by Joey_Berlin

John Cusack is not just a fine film actor, he is also one of the few to make the transition from teen sensation to grown-up star. Lots of Cusack fans have stuck with the 6-foot-3 Chicagoan since his earliest films, which remain popular rentals on video.

JOHN CUSACK - John Cusack stars in '1408,' a fright film based on one of Stephen King's short stories. CNS Photo courtesy of David Appleby. He first made waves starring in some of the quintessential high school movies of the '80s such as "Better Off Dead," "One Crazy Summer" and the 1989 romantic comedy "Say Anything." Cusack graduated effortlessly to more mature roles with cool turns in "The Grifters" and the dark comedy "Gross Pointe Blank" among his 45 film credits.

His new movie is "1408," a fright flick based on one of Stephen King's short stories. Cusack is in nearly every frame of the film, starring as a best-selling writer who specializes in hauntings. Researching a new book, he checks into the notorious room 1408 of a New York hotel, where Samuel L. Jackson is the manager.

Emphasizing character and back story over gushing blood, "1408" conjures up shock waves of creepy scares. Cusack, who turns 41 a week after the film opens, is a producer and co-writer of his next movie, "Brand Hauser," a dark political satire in which he plays a hit man in central Asia.

Q: Prior to filming "1408," what is the scariest hotel room experience you had?

A: Besides normal jet lag where you wake up and you have no idea what country you're in or what room you're in, which has happened to me before, I was also in a game reserve in South Africa. They said, "We've got to make sure you go back at night with a guard," because some woman had been there and she had taken her high heels off and wanted to go change her shoes. She tried to walk back to her cottage, and she got eaten. True story.

Q: But so far, you have not had any haunted hotel room experiences?

A: I do have an anecdote to tell, which I never do, so I'm going to tell it. I did a movie in upstate New York and there was this very, very scary old hotel, and I found out it's what Stephen King based "The Shining" on. It's this big hotel in Mohonk. It was supposed to be haunted and we were staying up there, and then we'd go walking back at night after one too many cocktails and it was a little frightening in there.

Q: When did you first see "The Shining?" Have you been a fan of Stephen King for a long time?

A: My parents took us to Nantucket to visit some cousins. "The Shining" had come out and already was sort of a classic. It was in all the revival houses and I snuck into a theater at around six o'clock because it was an R-rated movie. When I got out of the theater, it was night and I had to walk alone back to this cottage where we were staying at. It was a pretty windy road with these lamps and stuff. That was the scariest walk home I've ever taken after a movie. That was a bad, bad, bad, bad walk. I thought I heard Jack Nicholson around the corner of every bush. That freaked me out. So that was my first introduction to Stephen King.

Q: While filming your scenes alone in the room for "1408," you had the unusual acting challenge of performing solo for weeks. Did anything about the experience surprise you?

A: I think the director and I, we sort of had Stockholm Syndrome where the room was keeping us captive, but then as soon as we got out of the room and we got to work with Mary McCormack and Sam Jackson and stuff, it was kind of strange.

We did scenes in the lobby and there were all these extras, and then you'd go out to Venice Beach and there'd be surfers and things. We just thought, "We've got to get back in the room where it's safe and horrible," just me staring at the walls and I get tortured. And we started to think that made more sense than dealing with people after a while.

Q: Your character believes only in things which he can see with his own two eyes. Does that ring true for you as well?

A: That doesn't ring true for me. I thought one of the fun things about this piece was that King had written this very terrifically cynical character that is basically daring the gods or the devils to come and show themselves. Me, myself, I would never be that cynical. I think there's definitely stuff going on beyond our senses. I probably start where the character ended up at the end of the movie. I definitely think there's much more than meets the eye.

Q: "1408" deals with facing your inner demons. What is an inner demon that you have, that you would be terrified to face in that hotel room?

A: My shallow demons would be, like, rats. My big demons, and this hasn't happened to me, would be if, like, I was responsible for someone else's death or something. Who knows? But if something like that happened, I'd be haunted by that person. That would be my worst fear, if I did something to someone and being responsible for that. But on a shallow level, just rats.

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