

Interview: Leigh Whannell, James Wan Hunt Ghosts With 'Insidious'

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 29, 2011 - 2:24pm

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CHICAGO – Patrick Wilson (“Little Children”) and Rose Byrne (“Damages”) play a truly terrified couple in James Wan’s “Insidious,” opening this Friday, April 1st, 2011. Produced by the team behind “Paranormal Activity” and written and co-starring Leigh Whannell, the man who did the same double duty on “Saw,” “Insidious” hopes to be the haunted house movie of 2011 with a twist. The writer and director sat down with HollywoodChicago.com recently to talk about their film and real-life inspirations, the art of practical effects, and even the most terrifying memories of their childhood entertainment.

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you seen it with a crowd? Is there anything that plays differently than you expected? A bigger scare? A smaller scare?

James Wan: It actually went a lot better than I expected. When we went to Toronto, I had been so close with the movie — I cut the film myself — so that was my first indication as to how the film would play with an everyday audience. It was great.

Leigh Whannell: It seems to play really well. The more people are in the room, the more audience participation you can have with the screaming and the jolting, the better it is. Hopefully, it’s a film that also plays well late at night on DVD. But the crowd participation thing is awesome to watch.

HollywoodChicago.com: It hasn’t changed at all since Toronto?

Wan: It did. When we sold it to Sony, we actually got a bit of money to polish it and tweak it. So, yeah, this is the polished version.



Insidious
Photo credit: Film District

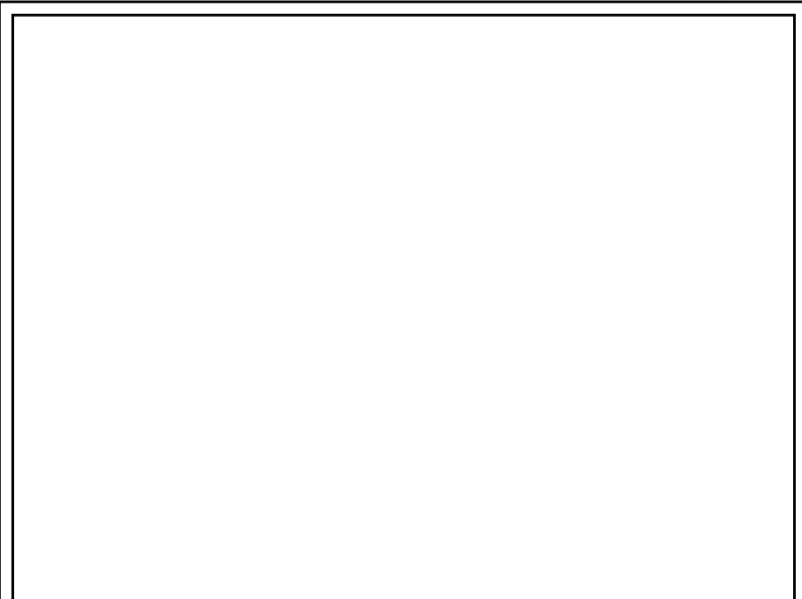
HollywoodChicago.com: [The film uses “Tiptoe Through the Tulips” by Tiny Tim during a particularly nightmarish moment.] Why is Tiny Tim’s music so terrifying?

Wan: [Laughs]. It’s the SONG. It’s the way he sings it.

Whannell: Everything about it. Even his look. I find that sometimes if things are too aggressively happy and cutesy than it crosses a line into creepy-ville. If something like Teletubbies pours it on too strong, it becomes utterly terrifying.

HollywoodChicago.com: There’s a lot of terrifying children’s entertainment.

Whannell: Right. Especially British. There’s nothing scarier than English children’s television.





Insidious

Photo credit: Film District

HollywoodChicago.com: I imagine, like, Romanian children's television to be pretty scary too.

Whannell: [Laughs]. Growing up in Australia, we had the commercial channels with American programming and then we had the ABC, which was a cousin of the BBC, and we were forced to watch that channel. I would flip from the American stuff to BBC and it would literally be like a chimney sweep — "Hello kids, my bones are cold. Do you know what it means to be cold?" Have you ever heard of "Worzel Gummidge"? YouTube it. It's about a scarecrow. The opening credits zooms in on a scarecrow who goes [looks up]. There's a scene with Worzel looking through a window at a kid and you just go "Aaaaahhhhhh!" [Laughs].

HollywoodChicago.com: Clearly, a major influence on you.

Whannell: Clearly. And go YouTube Chocky. It's about a floating ghost who takes to a boy. The voice was like "Hello, David." And the boy would stand there like the kid from "The Shining" and go "Hello, Chocky." Terrifying. [Laughs].

HollywoodChicago.com: Speak for a minute to all the message board trolls who will say that they've seen "The Amityville Horror" and "Haunting in Connecticut" and "Paranormal Activity" and every other haunted house film so why should they see yours?

Whannell: Well, the first thing I would say is that this film isn't entirely what it appears. It stars as a haunted house film and then takes a left turn into something we haven't seen before.

Wan: That's our thing, I think — take something that's very established like the serial killer genre (with "Saw") and then when people see it they'll realize it's different and unique. That's what we've done here with the haunted house genre.

Whannell: It's difficult to advertise it because then you give away the film. Essentially, you're stuck because you have to market something that looks fairly traditional when there's an Ace card up the sleeve. The other thing I would say is that, the fact that "Pineapple Express" was made won't stop me from seeing "Your Highness." There are staples.

Wan: If it's been done before, that's OK, as long as it's scary.

Whannell: While also thinking that this has something different, don't be turned off...know that this film is the scariest haunted house film that you're ever going to see. We want it to be as scary as anything you've seen in your life.



Insidious

Photo credit: Film District

HollywoodChicago.com: What I got from this is almost a throwback mentality — practical effects, on-set shooting — styles we haven't seen since "Poltergeist" or older. Speak a little about that if you could.

Wan: That was something I really wanted to do. I grew up with a lot of these older horror films — "The Haunting," "Carnival of Souls" — that to me is one of the creepiest movies, especially if you catch it in the middle of the night. What added to the chill was that they had very little money. It made an air of creepiness. We wanted to make this movie as low budget as we could. It's actually lower budget than "Saw." This is even more indie even though it doesn't look like it. I wanted to use the lack of funds to end up creating something a lot creepier. It would tie my hands from doing CGI. CGI is not scary. The more practical stuff you have in there, the better. CGI is great to enhance stuff but CGI monsters are not scary. The demon, the ghosts in this — all practical. That's really eerie. Today's kids grew up with a lot of CG stuff so "Insidious" may be a throwback but, for today's kids, it's kind of a fresh thing.

HollywoodChicago.com: For anyone, there's nothing creepier than a creaky door.

Wan: Yes. Exactly. Or a swinging rocking chair when no one is there. Or something out of the corner of your eye.



Insidious

Photo credit: Film District

HollywoodChicago.com: We can all relate to that. You can't relate to CGI demons in your backyard.

Wan: If you ask Leigh and, within the entire horror branch, what's the scariest kind of movie, we would say "the haunted house." We all live in houses. We can all relate. Our house is our sanctuary. Imagine if that's invaded.

HollywoodChicago.com: I read that you both claim to have brought personal experience to this.

Whannell: A lot of the inspiration doesn't come from other films. Most of it comes from stories we've heard that friends or relatives have told us. We're real ghost story aficionados.

Wan: Someone telling you something that happened to them is much scarier.

Whannell: It raises goose bumps because it's somebody I know and trust who is not the kind of person to make this kind of thing up. We collected them all...

Wan: ...and filtered them through our sensibilities.

HollywoodChicago.com: And that's important to the film. We have to trust that Patrick and Rose's characters aren't crazy. Speak a little about grounding the first act of the movie in reality.

Whannell: I think that's really important. It's really essential. The film goes some crazy places. You're asking a lot of people. If you're going to have any chance of the audience sticking with the movie, they have to believe that the characters are real. It was important to ground these guys. I spent a lot of time writing character backgrounds and basing them on people I knew. They were a combination of people I know. That really helped me to keep thinking about personal experiences instead of other scenes from other movies.

Wan: What I want to add to that, tying into why people should see this when they've seen many of this ilk, is that part of the reason why we go in the direction we do is to take something familiar and twist something on its head. The spin makes it original. At the same time, you run the risk of polarizing an audience when you go in a different direction. You have to take that chance or otherwise you see the same film again and again. Obviously, it comes down to taste, but Leigh and I love things that are quirky and out there and strange, almost alien. We like to take that and clash it with what is real. So, you end up getting this movie with two worlds inhabiting within each other.

Whannell: We walk a tightrope. With our films, the audience is quite polarized, passionately in either direction.

Wan: "Carnival of Souls" — It starts normal and then she starts seeing a creepy guy and it leads to an abandoned carnival. It's so original and unique.



Insidious

Photo credit: Film District

HollywoodChicago.com: Are there any literary inspirations? I have a friend who suggested a parallel between Edgar Allen Poe and "Saw." Was that a conscious inspiration? I mean "The Pit and the Pendulum" essentially IS a Jigsaw trap.

Whannell: Yeah. I think it was a conscious thing. Back then, the idea of this guy subjecting people to these little games and traps.

Wan: It's very Poe-ish.

Whannell: It's very "Pit and the Pendulum." I think so. I always loved the idea.

Wan: I equated it to "Fall of the House of Usher" — the woman all walled up. Very claustrophobic. Insanity. "Tell-Tale Heart."

HollywoodChicago.com: I read you were disappointed in "Dead Silence." Do you want to talk about that?

Wan: I don't, but Leigh loves to.

Whannell: It didn't turn out the way we wanted it to. And that's fine. I guess it had to happen eventually. We had such a good experience making "Saw." We won the lottery our first time out. Everyone was telling us it doesn't happen like that. Everything about "Saw" was so great that we were a little spoiled. It was only a matter of time before our Hollywood trial by fire occurred.

HollywoodChicago.com: But you learned lessons to take to this one?

Wan: Exactly. That was the key. We wouldn't have made "Insidious." It's all part of growing up. Learning. Experience. With "Insidious," I didn't want to phone it through the studio system. It would have been a different film.

HollywoodChicago.com: You would have had CGI demons.

Wan: Right. So, it would have done the film a great disservice. So, when we met with the producers of "Paranormal Activity," we thought it would be great to work together. You always want more toys and more time but I think, despite this being my smallest film, I think this is my most accomplished work.

Whannell: I think that there is an inevitable diluting process that happens through the studio system. They run a business. They need to keep producing hit films. They want to make sure that they've checked it, re-checked it, and checked it again. I don't think there's any room for quirkiness for the sake of quirkiness. They want the leanest cut of meat possible.

Check out the cut of meat in "Insidious" when it opens nationwide on Friday, April 1st, 2011.



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