

Interview: John Cusack Tackles Role of Edgar Allan Poe in ‘The Raven’

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CHICAGO – Though Chicago’s John Cusack is perhaps best known for his beloved roles as a down-to-earth charmer in “Say Anything” and “High Fidelity,” he’s no stranger to exploring the troubling depths of darkness. He’s engaged the dangerous obsessions of his neurotic puppeteer in Spike Jonze’s “Being John Malkovich” or the horrific visions of his paranormal writer in Mikael Håfström’s “1408”.

In James McTeigue’s period thriller, “The Raven,” Cusack tackles perhaps his darkest role to date: the legendary poet and writer, Edgar Allan Poe. The film blends history and fiction à la “Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter,” as Poe hunts down a serial killer whose crimes are modeled after the author’s goriest tales. During an April press conference at Chicago’s C2E2 convention, Cusack said that he admired Poe for being a “highbrow guy” who somehow managed to “write pulp Saturday afternoon thrillers” as well as “the most esoteric poetry in the world.” Hollywood Chicago spoke with Cusack about the process of immersing himself within Poe’s eerie world, as well as his appreciation of the modern fanboy culture.

HollywoodChicago.com: You’ve co-written several films in the past. What does writing mean to you and how does it ultimately help you express yourself?

John Cusack: I never have to finish the writing that I do because I’m always writing for the screen. I’m writing for the acting and the final cut ends up being the final draft of what you wrote. In essence, that’s not totally true because I’ve written monologues for Ben Kingsley and comedy for Dan Aykroyd, and I think, “I better get this right.” I always tweak it at the last minute or on the last day, so it’s a little different than other forms of writing where you really have to set it in stone before you print it. My writing partner Mark Leyner wrote “War, Inc.” with me, and he’s also got a crazy book out called “The Sugar Frosted Nutsack.” He’s such a brilliant, bizarre writer.

He came in and did a polish on “The Raven.” The original writers were good and the set-up was really good, but we wanted to make sure there was enough historical accuracy as Poe gets caught up in some meta-Poe thing where he becomes a character in one of his own stories. We used as much of his language as we could and made sure that his vernacular and idiom were up to the level of a master of the English language. So we did a re-write and Mark wrote a new Poe poem which is the one that Poe reads outside when the house is burning down. You’ve got to be a real writer to do that. We work together on fleshing out scripts with dialogue polishes. I’m always doing that as a writer.



John Cusack at the April 15th C2E2 convention in Chicago.

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the challenge in embodying the physicality of Poe?

Cusack: It was McTeigue's and my instinct that we didn't want to do the little mustache because we wanted to stay away from the Charlie Chaplin postage stamp thing. As much as I love that, I thought it would be limiting somehow. He also had long mutton chops, he was clean-shaven at times and he had a goatee at times, so there are different pictures of him. The one famous picture is of the mustache, but I wanted to get more of a feeling of the guy. He was dirt poor and a bad alcoholic so I got as gaunt as I could. I got down to about 190 pounds, which is what I [weighed] around high school. I also immersed myself in his material—his letters and writings—in order to get into that spook-house vibe. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your favorite scene to film in "The Raven"?

Cusack: The scene at the beginning where you see him out at night and he's looking over this carcass of a cat. Then he comes to the bar and as an addict, he knows what's going to happen because he's been there before. You've heard a lot of first-person journalists write about their inner-beasts, but Poe was the first one to do it. In "The Imp of the Perverse," he writes about the need to do the exact wrong thing and the most perverse thing—being drawn to the flame, and he writes about it so eloquently, and it's so funny and weird. When he goes to the bar while knowing that he's going to get his ass kicked, but being drawn into it anyway, and then having all the different facets of his character in that long sequence before he gets kicked out—I thought that was a nice scene. It was a good showcase for the writing and the acting and the directing. When we did that, I thought it stood alone as something that would be pretty cool.

HollywoodChicago.com: What sort of pressure did you feel in bringing Poe to the screen?

Cusack: I didn't feel pressure so much as I felt that it was an opportunity. He started so many different genres. The seeds he planted just grew out in so many different directions, from science fiction and Jules Verne ... to gothic horror to this mystical stuff to great poetry. You're never going to have a definitive version of a person. This is one dream of Poe. Someone else will do another one, but if you can feel the underworld in the movie or if you feel it coming out of my performance, that's great. The relationship between Salieri and Mozart [in "Amadeus"] is made up, but you get insight into Mozart and you also get to understand classical music in a way that you wouldn't if it was a straight biopic. It's a weird blend of fantasy, fiction and legend. Some of the legends around Poe are played with a little bit, and that's what he did in some of his writings too. So I thought it was a cool conceit and that this was a really cool pulp version of [his life]. I didn't feel pressure because I gave it everything I had and that's the best I can do.



John Cusack stars in Relativity Media's stylish gothic thriller The Raven.

Photo credit: Larry Horricks, Amontillado Productions, LLC

HollywoodChicago.com: What are your thoughts regarding the film's level of gore?

Cusack: It all comes from the source. He wrote stories that would start out like "Sherlock Holmes," and at the end of it, there would be an orangutang with a razor. He was out there. What happens in "The Pit and the Pendulum" happens in our movie. You can't not go there. He'd probably be laughing at all the "Saw" movies. Poe once said that words have no power to impress except for the exquisite horror of their reality. So here, he has the chance to see it come to life. I was interested in the mystical parts of him and his interest in the differences between waking and dreaming and life and death. I always thought that the supernatural, otherworldly element of Poe was the most interesting.

HollywoodChicago.com: How do you feel fanboy culture has changed since you started making films?

Cusack: I don't know that much about social media but I just like that people can group and curate information and share what they want with each other on [sites] like Twitter. I think it's really great when ideas are spread virally. When I started acting, you had to knock on the palace doors and ask, "Can I do a movie?" and then you had to talk to all the traditional press and get their consent. Now if you guys like this, you matter much more than "The New York Times." I think that's great because then I don't have to worry about all that. You can have direct access with people who like what you like without a filter and without asking permission from authority figures. As an Irish person, that's great for me. [laughs] I dig it.

HollywoodChicago.com: You once told my cousin, Jeremy Scahill, that you were particularly proud of your work in "1408"...

Cusack: There's a similar vibe to that project. [Stephen] King is a writer of the same ilk as Poe.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was it about that experience that you found appealing?

Cusack: On "1408," I literally got locked into a room with the director. It's a bit of a high-wire act, so you have to sort of trust each other. If he follows you and you follow him, you have each other's back at a certain point. We just went out there and made a really weird, crazed, berserk film. It was just him, me and the camera operator in the room, so it was a good experience. When he got "Shanghai," we went and did it again. I had a good experience with McTeigue too, and I felt the same sort of way on the set. It was him and me in Serbia and the money was raised independently so the studio came onboard afterwards. They picked it up, but the money was raised on McTeigue's and my name and the thriller aspect, so there was no one telling us what to do.

HollywoodChicago.com: How do you personally think that Poe died?

Cusack: The most realistic thing I read was that during a local election, there would be a voting sham where people would take a bunch of drugs at the bar and dress up in different clothes in order to vote multiple times. Some people think that's the reason why Poe was found wearing other people's clothes while muttering something about Reynolds. Other people think he was poisoned. I just don't think that you can live the way he did and survive.



Director James McTeigue discusses a scene with star John Cusack on the set of Relativity Media's stylish gothic thriller *The Raven*.

Photo credit: Larry Horricks, Amontillado Productions, LLC

HollywoodChicago.com: What real aspects of Poe's life did you bring to the character?

Cusack: I just read him all day and all night when I was making the movie. You can always take proxy characters and use things that Poe said in their scenes. After Poe's wife died, he had some romances and [the character of] Emily is used as a proxy for that. His relationship with male authority figures is seen in his scenes with Brendan Gleeson, where we use things that Poe said on record about other writers and editors. He had relationships with people that he felt were inferior to him, and would say certain things that would challenge them and push them. I put those things into Poe's relationship with Fields. He says, "I often thought I could distinctly hear the sound of darkness as it rushed over the horizon," to Fields in the film, but he actually said it in another context. You have a lot of historically accurate stuff in there, such as the fact that Poe went to West Point, he was athletic and a swimmer—but in a fictional setting. It's amazing that so much information on him is preserved in letters. Nobody talked on the phone back then.

HollywoodChicago.com: How difficult was it to stay in such a dark mindset during the film?

Cusack: It was helpful that we shot it during the winter in Serbia. We were shooting at night so I sort of felt like a vampire anyway. I didn't sleep much and felt like I was on a bender for eight weeks. When I came back home on Christmas Eve, I scared my family. They were like, "What happened?" It took a while to shake off. ... [The locations] brought a loneliness and darkness to the film. In Serbia, they had genocide fifteen years ago. There's a lot of violence in its history and a darkness to Eastern Europe. It's pretty palpable. People are beautiful and nice but you felt like you weren't going to come home. We definitely weren't in Kansas anymore.

HollywoodChicago.com: You recently told *The Huffington Post* that all your films are political. How would that statement apply to "The Raven"?

Cusack: Political or not, movies are about ideas. Art is about ideas, playing around with ideas and ideas are power in the modern world. People live and die for ideas. In this one, I think Poe is on a journey into the subconscious. He's like Orpheus descending and is straddling both worlds. The raven is a creature from the underworld and he is sort of opening that portal between worlds. Poe is exploring it while using all the sorrow in his life as an alchemist. There's a little bit in there about the paparazzi culture and the chickens coming home to roost on some of the sensationalistic, gruesome stuff. Obviously, the artist holds the mirror up to society, and Poe is very good at knowing the zeitgeist of the people and knowing what their fears and phobias were. But it's sort of a fine line—will it come back to bite you? Anytime you're doing a movie where the characters are really flawed and f—ked up, that's a good thing. I like movies where people are human. I'd rather watch Poe than one of the characters from "Top Gun."

'The Raven' stars John Cusack, Luke Evans, Alice Eve, Brendan Gleeson and Kevin McNally. It was written by Ben Livingston and Hannah

Shakespeare and directed by James McTeigue. It opens April 27 at local theaters. It is rated R.



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