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The Shape of Horror: Memories

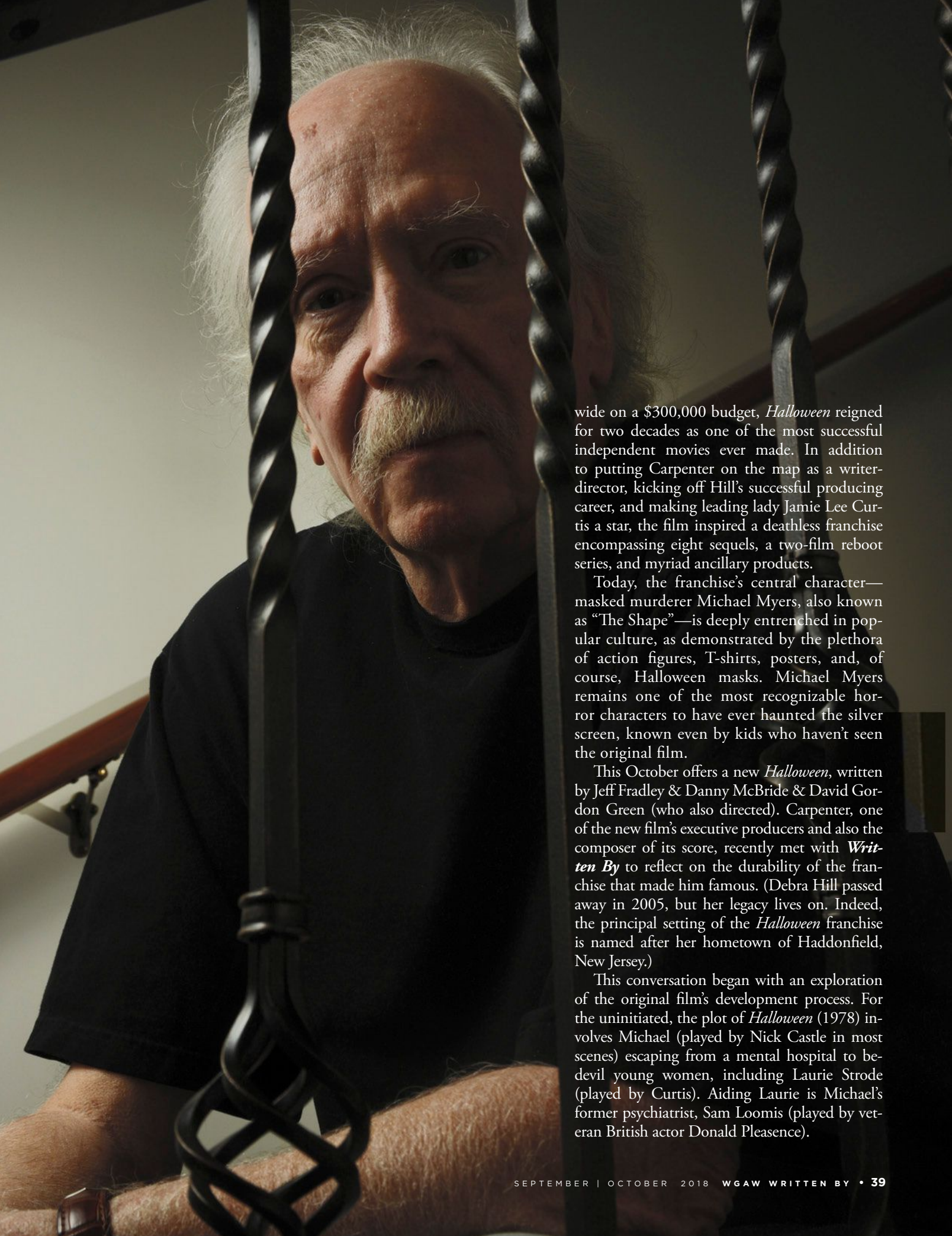
As a new vision of the franchise debuts, John Carpenter reflects on four decades of *Halloween*. of

In 1977, a 29-year-old filmmaker named John Carpenter needed a commercial breakthrough, even though he'd already notched several impressive accomplishments. While a graduate student at USC's film school, he co-wrote the Oscar-winning student film *The Resurrection of Broncho Billy* (1970). Then, with USC classmate Dan O'Bannon, Carpenter co-wrote a sci-fi/comedy short called *Dark Star*, which Carpenter also directed. After being acquired for distribution, the film was expanded to feature length and released theatrically in 1974. Carpenter spent the next couple of years writing and selling a number of spec scripts (one of which later became 1978's *Eyes of Laura Mars*, screenplay by Carpenter and David Zelag Goodman, story by Carpenter).

Carpenter achieved minor commercial and critical success with his first proper feature, the grim, low-budget thriller *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), which he wrote. Carpenter's script supervisor on the shoot was Debra Hill, who became his personal and professional partner for several years. The film caught the attention of producer Irwin Yablans, who wanted to make a low-budget horror movie about a killer menacing babysitters.

With Yablans serving as their executive producer, Carpenter and Hill wrote a script originally titled *The Babysitter Murders*, which Yablans later rechristened *Halloween* (1978). Returning roughly \$70 million world-

Michael Myers



wide on a \$300,000 budget, *Halloween* reigned for two decades as one of the most successful independent movies ever made. In addition to putting Carpenter on the map as a writer-director, kicking off Hill's successful producing career, and making leading lady Jamie Lee Curtis a star, the film inspired a deathless franchise encompassing eight sequels, a two-film reboot series, and myriad ancillary products.

Today, the franchise's central character—masked murderer Michael Myers, also known as “The Shape”—is deeply entrenched in popular culture, as demonstrated by the plethora of action figures, T-shirts, posters, and, of course, Halloween masks. Michael Myers remains one of the most recognizable horror characters to have ever haunted the silver screen, known even by kids who haven't seen the original film.

This October offers a new *Halloween*, written by Jeff Fradley & Danny McBride & David Gordon Green (who also directed). Carpenter, one of the new film's executive producers and also the composer of its score, recently met with *Written By* to reflect on the durability of the franchise that made him famous. (Debra Hill passed away in 2005, but her legacy lives on. Indeed, the principal setting of the *Halloween* franchise is named after her hometown of Haddonfield, New Jersey.)

This conversation began with an exploration of the original film's development process. For the uninitiated, the plot of *Halloween* (1978) involves Michael (played by Nick Castle in most scenes) escaping from a mental hospital to bedevil young women, including Laurie Strode (played by Curtis). Aiding Laurie is Michael's former psychiatrist, Sam Loomis (played by veteran British actor Donald Pleasence).

Peter Hanson: *What made you decide to write this project—the original Halloween—with a partner?*

John Carpenter: Debra Hill had been my script supervisor, and I thought she'd make a great producer, so I wanted her to be involved creatively with the project. It was a story about this murderer stalking around the neighborhood and killing various babysitters. Pretty simple. Anyway, she wrote the first draft, based on our conversations, and then I came in to finish it. She left out certain things. But she wrote, basically, the movements of the teenagers, and a lot of their dialogue. Then I spooked it up a little bit. I wrote Donald Pleasence's dialogue, and I wrote the action scenes the way I thought I would direct them.

In her draft, were there placeholders for scare scenes?

That's right. But Debra came up with the scene with [supporting actress] P.J. Soles as Lynda, who's made love to her boyfriend, and the boyfriend comes back with a sheet draped over him. That's totally hers, and that was really a stroke of genius. [Michael was under the sheet. Surprise!] Morbidly hilarious. I loved it. And then there are a couple of lines I can recognize as hers. "I thought you outgrew superstition." I never understood that line.

What are the different gratifications of a collaborative writing process versus a solo writing process?

The greatest thing is you have somebody to bounce your ideas off of, to reflect on what you've just written, to talk things out. If you have somebody you trust, it's great, because you're not alone facing a blank page, which is terrible. I had written a bunch of scripts. I had agents at the time who told me I had to write my way into the movie business. My goal in life, since I was eight years old, was to direct movies, so I said, "Okay." I'd been writing. I'd sold a lot of stuff. So I loved having a partner to split the duties. Debra loved writing that first draft. She was really into it.

Before Debra wrote her draft, what ideas did you discuss with her? I know the two of you prepared a list of scares, but



I put in action scenes because I knew what I wanted to do with them. For instance, after you think Jamie Lee has killed The Shape in the closet, she comes out and sits down, and then he sits up in the background. Well, that was written in because I knew I wanted to do that—I knew, with the right timing, that it could be scary.

beyond that, did you talk about a thematic overlay, or were you just building a thrill machine?

There was a thematic overlay, but I didn't discuss it with her. All we did was the nuts and bolts of the story. That was the thing to bang out. And then I basically polished it up, but on top of that, I put in the theme that I wanted to talk about—*evil*. Jamie Lee kind of says it in the classroom. Evil is an element. A force of nature. That's all. This killer has no personality. He's neither man nor supernatural. And then the ending suggests that he could live on. So it's not much of a theme. [laughs]

I was pretty young. I didn't know it was going to be a thrill machine. I wanted it to be, but I didn't know. I grew up with horror movies, so I just dealt with things that I had

seen—things I thought I could stage better, or a movie that I saw where I felt, "Boy, that's a great moment." There was a British movie, *The Innocents* [screenplay by William Archibald and Truman Capote, based on the novella *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James] and it showed a figure standing across a lake. It was totally creepy. That's where I got the idea of Michael standing by the house, just watching, motionless.

Going into Halloween, did you already have an idea that you reacted more strongly to genre pieces that seemed to be about something, as opposed to genre pieces that are just machines?

Machines are great. I love machines. No. That has nothing to do with it. That's not for the audience that I'm playing for, which is in my head. You have to write for an audience, but it's in your head. No, I don't care if it's about something. It doesn't need to be about anything.

Once you started plugging your material into Debra's script, did you try to inject a particular sensibility in addition to building out the scare scenes?

Anytime that Donald Pleasence spoke, I would put in poetic foreboding. He delivered it so beautifully, and I wasn't sure he was going to play the part at first. But I wanted

somebody like Donald or Christopher Lee or Peter Cushing to play that part. I wanted somebody who was able to say those florid lines. They're really over the top. But to have an actor with a British accent say stuff like that? You bought it.

Pleasence's character describes Michael as "pure evil." What did that mean to you in 1977-78, and what does that mean to you when you think about those lines now?

I don't think about those lines now, because I never watch my movies. I can't stand it—just put that movie aside. But I remember a trip I took in college back in Kentucky, for a psychology class. I forget what it was called. But we went to an asylum and saw this kid, and there was this *stare*. It was the creepiest thing I'd ever seen. He was just staring at me. I don't know what was on his mind. It was dangerously disturbing. Since Michael was going to wear a mask throughout the movie, we had to create a character for him—so the character is this [disturbed] kid. That's all. He's just going to be pure evil. I'm not going to try to explain what happened. You're dealing with evil.

At what stage did Irwin Yablans suggest calling the movie Halloween?

Irwin would call up on the phone, trying to gin up excitement. Irwin has always been a Hollywood hustler, and I wanted to direct. Man, I was ready to direct. Day and night. So he suggested, on one of those hustle calls, "We'll call it *Halloween*." Great idea. Nobody had ever done it. Nobody thought to do it. So we made this little, tiny horror movie with this big title.

Since you knew you were going to direct, were there things you put into the script that you wouldn't have put into a for-hire script because they were director-dependent?

I put in action scenes because I knew what I wanted to do with them. For instance, after you think Jamie Lee has killed The Shape in the closet, she comes out and sits down, and then he sits up in the background. Well, that was written in because I knew I wanted to do that—I knew, with the right timing, that it could be scary. So that kind of thing went in the script. I wanted visual foreshadowing when Donald Pleasence's character uses the phone. I wanted there to be thunder and clouds in the distance, to foreshadow what was coming.

What do you think are the most effective storytelling techniques in the first Halloween?

I have no idea. I made it, so I know what appeals to me. All the movies I've made, sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, and I don't really know what people see. It's really crazy. I only know what I saw and what I wanted.

Let's talk about Michael, who, as you said, was conceived as a non-character. At any point did you or Debra entertain

the idea of giving him more dimensions, or did you know going in that you wanted to do the "force of nature" thing?

I knew going in. And I knew that, look, if you take a picture of a doll, it has these eyes, but they're cold and dead—so if you hold on that doll long enough with the camera, people are going to get uncomfortable and get scared, because it's not a person, it's a facsimile. The same thing goes with Michael. You strip away character so the audience begins to project things onto him. There's a scene where Jamie Lee rips the mask off. Well, the guy underneath isn't scary, but the audience always screams, because of what they *think* they see. It's always what you think you see.

You've mentioned in other interviews that, for you, modern horror begins with Psycho [1960, screenplay by Joseph Stefano from the novel by Robert Bloch], which of course provides a complicated psychology for Norman Bates. How did you know, instinctively, that you wanted to take the opposite approach?

I'd seen the movies that came after *Psycho*—like *Homicidal* [1961, written by Robb White]—and there was always way too much exposition. It's boring. Nobody cares about that. I'd never seen a movie that was like what I wanted to do, where there's nothing. Oh, I have to give credit to *Westworld*. Yul Brynner. That was my inspiration. "Draw." [In the 1973 film written and directed by Michael Crichton, Brynner plays a relentless killer robot who wears a cowboy costume and challenges terrified humans to gunfights by saying, in a chilling monotone, "Draw." The film is the basis for the HBO series of the same name, created by Jonathan Nolan & Lisa Joy.]

After the success of the first Halloween, the idea of a killer who can't be killed gained popularity, with the introduction in the '80s of Freddy Krueger in the A Nightmare on Elm Street movies and Jason Voorhees in the Friday the 13th films. When you were developing the first Halloween, did you have specific limitations in mind? Did you know how much punishment Michael could withstand?

Hadn't even thought of it. I just thought it would be cool if I could create a scare out of a shot of an empty space. That's what I really wanted to do. [The film ends with Loomis shooting Michael, who tumbles out of a second-story window—but when Loomis looks down, Michael has disappeared.]

The ending of Halloween implies that pure evil can't be destroyed. Does that ending reflect something about the way you see the world, or the way you saw the world at a certain time?

Sure. Sure. Very much so. That's the way I saw things back then. I haven't thought about it in a long time. Do I still feel that way? I think so. I think there is real evil. I know there is.

The way Loomis operates in the movie is unusual, because he combines two archetypes that don't seem

compatible—he's a hunter and a father figure.

Loomis is an adult. Everybody else is a kid. The adult is talking about adult things that he knows. The kids don't know any of this—they're worried about their boyfriends and things that normal kids are worried about. I mean, you'd never think about a killer walking down the street where you live. The adult figure knows things the kids don't know. It's like the oracle in Greek drama. In some of the stuff that I do, the oracle is a necessary archetype. You can make him colorful, you can make him somewhat poetic. He serves a function, ultimately, of delivering exposition without being boring, which is really hard to do.

The oracle also gives your stories a mythological quality, because if people don't listen to warnings from the oracle, they can't claim ignorance once they stumble into danger.

That's right. If the universal-wisdom character is telling us something, but the hero doesn't listen, then we know something he doesn't, which is the whole basis of suspense. We have to know what the character doesn't know. Uncertainty is frightening to people. We all live with the idea that we're going to die, but it's at an uncertain date, so uncertainty is frightening. If you play with that kind of an ending and you let the audience off the hook a little bit, you can get away with it.

Let's talk briefly about Halloween II [1981, written by Carpenter and Hill], the sequel with which you were most closely involved.

Do we have to?

I did say "briefly." At any point during the generation of Halloween II did you think making the movie was a good idea?

Look, I'm of two minds. There's the purist and there's the businessman. The purist says, "Hell, no. The story's over. Don't fuck it up. Don't urinate on your movie by making the sequel." Then the businessman realizes, "I can't stop my business partners from making a sequel. I don't have that kind of power. So my choice is to pout or to collect the check and work on it." I decided to do the latter. Purely practical, American, capitalist move. But the purist in me, the lover of cinema, was like, "Ugh, now I'm a whore."

The sequels I can't answer to, even though I wrote *Halloween II*. Debra had given up by that point. She didn't have anything to do with writing *II*, but we shared credit, like Lennon/McCartney: Carpenter/Hill. I wasn't gonna cut her out. She was there at the beginning. She wrote the sheet-draping scene! She was coming along for the ride.



[Carpenter and Hill concluded their active franchise involvement by producing 1982's *Halloween III: Season of the Witch*, written by Tommy Lee Wallace. The only *Halloween* film not to feature Michael Myers, it was designed to rebrand the franchise as an anthology series, but it was a commercial disappointment.] What was the thinking behind the anthology approach?

I just thought, "I don't want to do [Michael Myers movies] anymore—let's make something new." I can't believe that they went along with the idea. I guess they thought I knew what I was doing, but I proved them wrong. The movie's a lot better than everybody gives it credit for. It has some great things in it. But you can't convince an audience of that. They make up their own minds.

There's the 4-5-6 period, which revives Michael as the star of a slasher franchise; there's the H20/Resurrection period, which brings back Jamie Lee as Laurie; and there's the Rob Zombie period, which reboots the franchise. [The latter sequels and reboots span 1988 to 2009, with most films doing mediocre business until *Zombie's* 2007 entry *Halloween*, which earned a surprising \$80 million worldwide.]

I don't really know much about them. For *H20* [1998's *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later*, screenplay by Matthew Greenberg and Robert Zappia, story by Zappia], Jamie called me and said, "I heard from Kurt [Russell] that you guys had such great fun coming back [for 1996's *Escape from L.A.*, written by Carpenter & Kurt Russell & Debra Hill, a sequel to 1981's *Escape from New York*, written by Carpenter & Nick Castle], so let's go back and make another *Halloween*." I went to a certain length with that project because I love Jamie and I wanted to be there, but I ended up not doing it, and that's fine.

So, the sequels don't mean anything to you?

They don't mean anything personal to me. There was one movie where they were in a house that was hooked up with cameras, and there were some absolutely stupid scenes in that movie of Michael Myers chasing kids, and in the end, this rapper gives a speech—I can't remember what it was about, violence or the media or something—and I thought, "My God, what the hell's happened to this franchise? It's all gone!"

I'm curious what you thought of the first act of *Zombie's* *Halloween*, which suggests that Michael grew up in an abusive household.

It was just a choice that he made, but I thought it was a mistake. To get specific about this character totally undercuts it. Norman Bates needs explanation in *Psycho*. That's how that works. *Halloween* is just the opposite. The less explanation, the better. But, listen, the guy made a hit. I can't knock that.


Which brings us to the new movie.

David Gordon Green and his writing partner, Danny McBride, came in with a great idea. They wanted to make Michael real. Instead of a supernatural character, they wanted to make him a real killer—and they wanted to pretend the sequels never happened. They wanted to start right with the last bit of action in *Halloween*, except that Michael gets captured. He doesn't escape. I thought, "Well, that's interesting." They're kind of doing an alternate reality. [Producer] Jason Blum convinced me to be executive producer—he said, "We just want you to shepherd it." I made a couple comments on the script, which I think were helpful. I visited the set. I got to do the music.

What do you hope people get out of the new movie?

I think it's gonna scare the shit out of them. The people that Jason and Universal are shooting for are not the fans of the *Halloween* movies from the past. That's the way it goes. The people going to the movies today are young, so they're gonna see a new horror movie. They may have heard of the old one: "Ah, my dad likes that." This one is for a new generation.

Why does this franchise resonate 40 years later?

Oh, wow. Well, I don't have a clear answer for you. I'd love to say it was the brilliance in the writing and directing of the first film, but I know better than to say that. I think it's because of all these horror franchises that were invented in the late '70s and early '80s—low budget, unkillable killer—*Halloween* is simple and elegant. And by "elegant," I don't mean that in a way that describes it, like, artistically. It's not my genius. It's not my vision. It's because the movie is like a fable. It's almost like a little fairy tale, and we can project onto that anything we want. 

I just thought, "I don't want to do [Michael Myers movies] anymore—let's make something new." I can't believe that they went along with the idea. I guess they thought I knew what I was doing, but I proved them wrong. The movie's a lot better than everybody gives it credit for. It has some great things in it. But you can't convince an audience of that. They make up their own minds.