

DIRECTORS EXCLUSIVE

Play Your Cards Right

Spenser Cohen and Anna Halberg on how fate dealt a hand for **Tarot**

WORDS: STEVE O'BRIEN



Elise (Larsen Thompson): health and safety scandal.



Harriet Slater as Haley: dodgy kebab, maybe?



Humberly González as Madeline: oh dear...



Adain Bradley as Grant and Jacob Batalon as Paxton.

▶ GIVEN THE SHEER VOLUME OF horror movies, it's surprising how few have exploited the subject of tarot. Sure, it's featured – in films from *Live And Let Die* to *The Mortal Instruments: City Of Bones* to *A Dark Song* – but barely any have made these mystical cards central to the story.

"It's crazy to think that tarot has been around for hundreds of years and no one's really made a movie about it," writer/director Anna Halberg tells Red Alert, somewhat incredulously. "They're so iconic and so inherently scary. I have friends who refuse to get readings done, because they just don't want to know just in case."

Tarot is the first co-directing feature credit for Halbert and her creative partner Spenser Cohen. In 2022 the two wrote (with Cohen directing) a horror short titled "Blink". The film impressed Screen Gems, who promptly approached the duo about helming what would become *Tarot*. "We started writing the movie during Covid, and I feel like horror movies

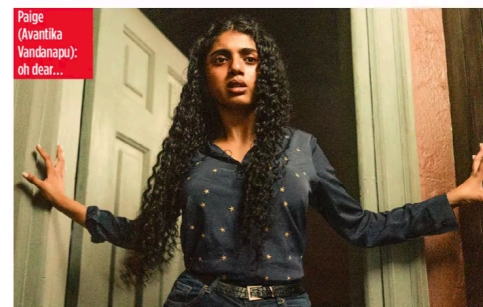
work the best when they reflect what's going on in society or culture at the time," Halberg suggests. "At that point, society was in a very uncertain place, and we saw this rise in astrology and tarot on social media. People who were looking to all these ancient practices to make sense of the world and to find answers and some certainty for the future. So it felt like a really ripe idea."

Tarot centres on a group of college friends who start dying in ways that are related to their fortunes after having their tarot cards read. Halberg says the pair approached the film "like a *Twilight Zone* episode" (both are massive fans of the anthology series), while Cohen explains that they were aiming for a combination of "Steven Spielberg and James Wan... So a fun movie with fun scares."

Halberg says they went into *Tarot* intending to make a PG-13 horror – meaning, presumably, less of a reliance on blood and guts.

"I've never found gore particularly scary," she says. "Most of the time we feel it's what

you don't see and where the audience uses their imagination that's scarier than what you do see. For us, it's really about the tension and insinuating what's happening instead of showing it on screen."



Paige (Avantika Vandanapu): oh dear...

"We always go back to older movies," adds Cohen. "We looked at *Alien* a lot – there's not a missed second in that film, it's just perfect. We also looked at John Carpenter's *The Thing*, and we looked at *Jaws*. We were always going back to these movies from the '60s, '70s and '80s to be inspired by – those are our favourites."

Halbert and Cohen have known each other for nearly two decades (both graduated in Film and Television Production from the University of Southern California) and have collaborated on such movies as *Expendables* and *Extinction*, but this is their first co-directing gig.

It's rare for a film to be directed by two people, unless they're siblings (see the Wachowskis, the Coens and the Hughes). So how does it work, exactly?

"Well, Anna and I are basically siblings – not by blood, but we've worked together for half our lives, and we're best friends," beams Cohen. "We even finish each other's

“For us, it's really about the tension and insinuating what's happening”

sentences," adds Halberg. "We make sure when we're on set, when we're having communications with actors or department heads, that they don't need to get sign off from both of us, that we speak for each other."

With both having been credited as screenwriters before, they admit it's enormously satisfying to finally be in charge of bringing their script to the screen.

"When you write something," says Cohen, "it goes through the studio process, and everything gets interpreted, and by the time it gets onto the screen sometimes you recognise parts of it and sometimes you don't. This is the

first time where we really felt like [with] what we set out to do, once we got to the end of the process, that it was all exactly as we wanted."

At the moment, both are waiting for *Tarot* to be unleashed on audiences ("We're nervous and excited," says Cohen), and also planning their next move as writer/directors. It seems that, like their favourite television show *The Twilight Zone*, they're looking to tell a variety of stories in different genres.

"We focus a lot on elevated genre," says Halberg. "So whether that's horror or science fiction or action thriller, it's always stuff that's a little bit left of centre or five minutes in the future."

"So we're definitely excited to play in different arenas, but I do think there's a throughline for all of the ideas that we get excited about." ●

Tarot is in cinemas from 10 May.

▶ SCI-FACT! "Blink" starred Sophie Thatcher as a woman only able to communicate with her eyes after being attacked by an entity.