

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Lecter's Next Stage

Nikolai Foster on giving **The Silence Of The Lambs** the theatrical treatment WORDS: STEVE O'BRIEN

 BRINGING A HIT MOVIE to the stage isn't a new thing (think *Back To The Future*, *Beetlejuice* and *The Lost Boys*, among many others), but what is unusual is taking one of cinema's greatest thrillers and turning it into a live experience. That was the challenge that director Nikolai Foster decided to undertake, breathing theatrical life into Jonathan Demme's 1991 classic *The Silence Of The Lambs*.

"Thrillers traditionally do very well, and I thought, 'Well, what is the greatest thriller of all time that's never been done on stage?'" Foster tells Red Alert. "Being a massive fan of Thomas Harris's novel, and also the film, I thought, 'Wouldn't it make a great stage adaptation?' Then I said to myself, 'Never in a million years would we get the rights.' But I thought, 'Fuck it, let's ask Thomas Harris.' So we did, and we got them, which is just incredible!"

In some ways, it's surprising that no one has tried to adapt Harris's novel for the stage before. There's a delicious theatricality to Demme's film, from Anthony Hopkins's lip-smacking performance as Hannibal Lecter to Kristi Zea's gothic, expressionistic sets. Was it hard for Foster, then, to ignore the aesthetics of the movie and go his own way?

"I've done enough of these things," he says. "Whether we're adapting a novel or a film, you know not to fuck around and try and recreate verbatim what is either on the page or in the film. You have to deliver the key moments for an audience, but I think there's no point doing it if

you're not going to engage your own imagination.

"It's a single environment where, when we use projection and lighting and soundscape and music and costume, we can give a real expression of mood. I suppose the only real thing that we've

really paid homage to is the corridors. That idea of doors and doorways is a theme that we've taken up, and people knocking on the wrong doors and appearing in doors and going through doors into the unknown."

Of course, at the centre of the

story is one of cinema's – and the literary world's – greatest monsters. Dr Hannibal Lecter has been essayed on screen many times, chiefly by Anthony Hopkins, Brian Cox and Mads Mikkelsen, so finding the right person to play Harris's cultured



EastEnders' John Partridge as Dr Hannibal Lecter.



Hopkins as Lecter with Jodie Foster in Demme's film.

KEN REGAN/ORION/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK



"He just dived in" says Foster of Partridge's turn as Lecter.

cannibal was no easy task.

"I'd met lots of the greatest stage actors of our day," says Foster of the audition process, "but I think there was a lot of fear about being compared to Anthony Hopkins. They would read the part, and it just felt intellectual and cerebral, and it didn't come to life.

"Then John Partridge [best known for his role as Christian Clarke in *EastEnders* from 2008-2016] came in and read, and it was theatrical, and filled with danger and hotspur and brio, and it had a real sort of dazzling theatricality. I thought, 'There it is, here is somebody who is egoless, who is unafraid, who has nothing

"I thought, 'Well, what is the greatest thriller of all time?'"

to prove and nothing to lose.' He just dived in, and it's beautiful, and mesmerising, and you don't compare it to Hopkins."

Both Harris's novel of *The Silence Of The Lambs* and Demme's movie tread that fine line between thriller and horror, but Foster says he's mindful of leaning too much into the scares for the stage adaptation.

"What I've noticed with a lot of thrillers is you're getting a whole

new audience," he tells us. "You're dealing with a very wide-ranging demographic, so you don't want to horrify in the literal sense that you might do on screen. As a director and team approaching this, we need to be more imaginative. Obviously, the novel trades in psychological thrills through this intense relationship between our two protagonists, and I suppose, in the writing and the direction and the casting of the play, we just have to make sure that we maintain that intensity on stage."

The Silence Of The Lambs opens at Leicester's Curve Theatre (of which Foster is Artistic Director), before heading out on tour. Should this production be the hit that its

makers are hoping for, would he be interested in bringing Harris's other Hannibal Lecter stories, including *Red Dragon* and *Hannibal*, to the stage?

"That's a really good idea," he says. "I honestly hadn't thought about that, but if you think about it, there's so many of those, like PD James novels, for example, that they do a tour of one title, and then a couple of years later they come back with another. I actually think that's a fantastic idea. I'll credit SFX if we do it!"

The Silence Of The Lambs premieres at the Curve Theatre in Leicester on 1 August. Visit silenceofthelambsplay.com.

STOCK ART: OLEKSII KRIACHKO GETTY

SCI-FACT! Though not a straight adaptation, there was a 2005 theatrical production by Jon and Al Kaplan, titled *Silence! The Musical*.