

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# Mother Knows Best

Alexandre Aja on his new survivalist horror flick

**Never Let Go** WORDS: STEVE O'BRIEN

Samuel, Momma, Nolan and a very good boy.



THE “SURVIVALIST HORROR” IS A micro-genre that’s had something of a resurgence in the past few years, with a spate of family-orientated fright flicks that have successfully crossed over to mainstream audiences. That’s the hope, then, that director Alexandre Aja has for *Never Let Go*, a movie that has echoes of genre stablemates *A Quiet Place*, *It Comes At Night* and *Bird Box*, while at the same time carving its own distinct niche.

“This is a film that was presenting itself as a straightforward survival movie,” says Aja about his first reactions to reading Kevin Coughlin and Ryan Grassby’s script, “something in the vein of *Bird Box* and *A Quiet Place*, but then it

was taking another direction. That’s really what got me excited.”

The movie follows a mother, played by Halle Berry (also an executive producer), and her twin sons (Anthony B Jenkins and Percy Daggs IV) who are living way off the grid in a cabin in the woods. Berry’s character insists that they have to protect themselves from a malevolent spirit that has decimated the world outside.

So far, so *Evil Dead*, yet *Never Let Go* is no cartoon gorefest, instead exploring what happens to that family bond when one of the children begins to doubt the very existence of this mysterious threat. “I just fell in love with the story,” enthuses the director. “It went into

what it meant being a parent but also what it is being a child and what you believe and don’t believe. It had a really strong impact on me – I just kept thinking about that script.”

What distinguishes *Never Let Go* from Aja’s other movies is that this is very much a chamber piece, with a bare bones cast. That’s certainly new territory for the director, who broke through with 2006’s guts-soaked *The Hills Have Eyes* remake, and last played in the horror sandpit in 2019 with the alligator monster movie *Crawl*.

“I saw it as something that was very intimate, and because it was intimate it could be much more scary,” Aja says. “Not scary with



Should Momma (Halle Berry) really be worried?



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- Alex Proyas to helm a movie of Karel Capek's 1920 play **RUR**.
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- David F Sandberg to direct a big-screen adaptation of horror videogame **Until Dawn**.
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- Marvel's "first family" movie to be called **The Fantastic Four: First Steps**. Aw, lookit baby Galactus, so cute...



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the evil and where does the evil come from, and how it's smart and patient and can take whatever form to trick or seduce you, that was the interesting element. I hope people will come out with a discussion about what the evil was."

Aja is full of admiration for not just his leading actor ("She's just one of the most skilled and talented actresses out there"), but also for her pre-teen co-stars, both of whom have to do some fairly intense acting in this dramatic film.

"I wanted them to have a real brotherhood relationship," says the director about Anthony B Jenkins and Percy Daggs IV. "I remember the day we auditioned Percy: at the end, we were all in tears, it was really emotional. The same thing happened with Anthony. It was interesting, because I didn't want the two of them to be the same character, they're both very different in the story, but on set they really did become like brothers."

### IN FEAR

Aja is clearly hoping that *Never Let Go* has a similar kind of crossover appeal as *A Quiet Place* and *M3GAN*, films that play beyond the horror hardcore. "I feel that this movie has a reach that's a little wider than *The Hills Have Eyes* or *Crawl*," he suggests.

"There is something that comes from that fairy tale approach that yes, it's scary, but it's not shocking - it's not about the blood or the gore, it's about something else. It's much more in the vein of *A Quiet Place* or *Bird Box* or *The Sixth Sense* or *The Others*, movies that are definitely in the genre, but they're much more open to a wider audience."

As for the future, Aja says he's just about to start pre-production on a new movie. So, will this be another horror? "Oh yes," he smiles. "But I'm always trying to do something different. Genre to me is always a very strong, immersive experience, the type of movie that stays with you. I never have the feeling that I'm doing the same movie again." ●

*Never Let Go* is in cinemas from 27 September.

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the shock value, but scarier in a psychological way, something that's very tied to parenthood – you know, should I trust the person that's meant to be protecting me?"

But *Never Let Go* is about more than that. What appealed to Aja is that the film works as an allegory for modern-day America, a country that is politically, and religiously, more polarised than ever before.

"It's about this divided world, between the people who believe and don't believe, between the people who ask questions and the people who don't," he says. "The question of what is

► **SCI-FACT!** Halle Berry's role required her to learn how to skin a squirrel. But don't worry, it wasn't a real one.