

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

# The Camera Never Lies

JT Mollner spills (some of) the beans on his twist-laden horror **Strange Darling**

WORDS: STEVE O'BRIEN



JT MOLLNER REMEMBERS THE day his mind conjured up the image that would kickstart the writing of his second feature film. “I just started to see this woman running through the woods,” he says, “being chased by this inescapable evil coming towards her.”

It’s a classic image from a thousand horror films, but not one that usually opens a movie – and that’s what makes *Strange Darling* strikingly different. It’s a cat and mouse story told in six chapters, but crucially not in chronological order. It’s a puzzle, then, with various twists and turns that make talking about it a difficult thing for the writer/director.

“We had these uncomfortable conversations with distributors where people were like, ‘Well, we love it, but the things we love about it we can’t really put in the marketing material,’” Mollner tells Red Alert. “So it’s been a delicate dance to make sure that people know there’s more to this than just brutality and predation, and all the archetypal tropes that you see in the trailer. Those are in there, but there’s more to it than that, without spoiling certain surprises for the audience.”

So what can we tell you about a movie that relies on some major rug-pulls? Well, according to the official synopsis, “A relentless predator tracks an injured woman [played by *Reacher*’s Willa Fitzgerald] through the Oregon wilderness. The woman does her best to



Willa Fitzgerald (*The Lady*) and Kyle Gallner (*The Demon*).

outsmart her attacker [Kyle Gallner], but with each tense moment she grows weaker and less able. He’s a man on a mission, and it’s only a matter of time before he captures his prey.”

“That first image I had was born from the classic horror films from the ‘70s,” Mollner says, “the final girl running through the woods. I thought, ‘This is a cliché, but I’m very fascinated with this character. It’s been done so many times, but is there more to say about this final girl?’ Then the idea of it being chapter three came to me, which is the opening chapter.”

Mollner says he was “as surprised as audiences have been” where the story took him. “It had to be in that order,” he stresses,

“but when we pitched the script, people liked it right away, but there was always some discussion about, ‘Should this be in sequence? Is it going to be too confusing?’ I really fought hard to make sure it stayed exactly in that order, because I think that if you disturb the ecosystem of the narrative, everything goes right off the rails.”

If *Strange Darling*’s narrative structure is unconventional, so too is its aesthetic, with the movie opening with a title card proudly stating that it’s shot entirely on 35mm film. Mollner and his director of photography Giovanni Ribisi (yes, the actor) are both celluloid loyalists, it seems.

“I don’t think there’s a right way and a wrong way to shoot a movie, but the right way for me is film,” he explains. “Every director needs to have something that they’re passionate about visually. Certain visual artists use either paint or they use a computer or they use pencil and for me, the paint is film.”



Director JT Mollner has a good ponder.



## NEWS WARP HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Bruce Campbell voicing Ash in an animated version of **Evil Dead**, now in development.
- Tawny Newsome and Justin Simien writing a live-action **Star Trek** comedy series, set in the 25th century.
- Jensen Ackles and Aya Cash starring in **Vought Rising**, Prime Video's prequel to *The Boys*.
- Robert Picardo and Tig Notaro have enlisted as series regulars on **Star Trek: Starfleet Academy**.
- Paramount+ have cancelled **Halo** after two seasons.
- Dan Stevens stars in season three of **The Terror**, based on Victor LaValle's novel *The Devil In Silver*.
- Peacock abandon development of Sam Esmail's **Battlestar Galactica** reboot.
- Hudson Thames to voice Peter Parker in animated series **Your Friendly Neighbourhood Spider-Man**.
- Matt Berry joining season two of **Citadel**.
- *Chilling Adventures Of Sabrina* showrunner Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa developing horror-comedy **Bat Boy** with *One Piece*'s Joe Tracz.



The Lady, as she's only known.



If it's not one thing, it's another...



"Damn it, we're all out of oven chips!"

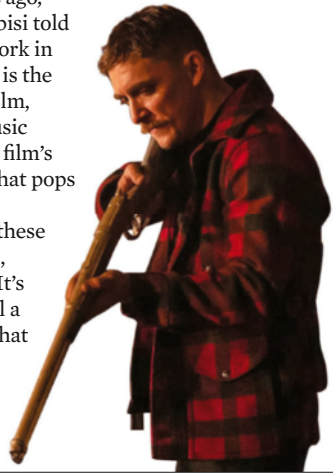


“That first image I had was born from the classic horror films from the '70s”

Giovanni feels that way too – we're both such diehards.”

Mollner and Ribisi met a few years ago, bonding over their love of movies. Ribisi told the director about his ambitions to work in cinematography, and *Strange Darling* is the actor's first DOP credit on a feature film, having previously shot shorts and music videos. Together, they worked on the film's distinctive palette, creating a movie that pops with primary colours.

“You watch *The Devils* and it's got these rich, saturated colours,” Mollner says, referencing Ken Russell's 1971 film. “It's got this candy coating, but there's still a grain and a texture and a depth to it that makes it painterly and cinematic. So we wanted to find that – we didn't want to do a dirty, grindhouse-type film with fake scratches.”



There were eight years between Mollner's first movie (the 2016 Western *Outlaws And Angels*) and this one, but Red Alert suspects that it won't be as long a wait for his third film. While the next JT Mollner script we'll see is his screenplay for Stephen King's *The Long Walk*, which Francis Lawrence is helming, he's up for being a filmmaker for hire.

“I think I'd like the next movie to be something I've written, and maybe that'll happen,” he tells us. “But I'm also reading things that I haven't because I feel, well, Darren Aronofsky writes, but at some point *Black Swan* came across his desk, and that's one of his best movies. I'm just grateful to be in a position where I probably can make another movie soon.” ●

*Strange Darling* is in cinemas from 20 September.

**SCI-FACT!** JT Mollner's family have a business called **Freakling Brothers**, which runs haunted houses in Las Vegas.

VINCENT SANDOVAL/GETTY