

ONE OF THE MOST FRIGHTENING FILMS TO COME OUT OF AUSTRALIA,
THE BABADOOK BRINGS US A BOOGEYMAN STORY FROM A
RARE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE...

A DARKNESS DOWN UNDER

BY
APRIL
SNELLINGS

LET ME IN!



EVER SINCE MEDEA KNIFED HER KIDDIES TO DEATH TO GET BACK AT HER UNFAITHFUL HUSBAND, STORYTELLERS HAVE KNELT AT THE BLOODY ALTAR OF THE MONSTROUS MOTHER.

What only a few filmmakers have done, though, is approach the story from the perspective of the mother in question, and to wonder what's driven her to such wicked measures.

Enter *The Babadook*, the remarkably effective feature debut from Australian writer-director Jennifer Kent. Out this month from IFC Midnight, it's a rare female-centric take on the mother-as-monster trope that turns a seemingly straightforward spookshow into a complex and disturbing psychological horror story. It's not really about the boogeyman that lurks under the bed, but the demons that lurk beneath our own skin.

In its early scenes, *The Babadook* seems to belong to an entirely different subgenre of domestic horror. Young Sam (played by newcomer Noah Wiseman) is a bit of a bad seed; he's prone to violent outbursts and most certainly does not play well with others. It's hard not to sympathize with his single mom, Amelia (Essie Davis), as she becomes increasingly frustrated with his behaviour and detached from the people who surround her. We eventually learn why she's so cold toward the boy: nearly seven years ago, Amelia's husband (Sam's father) was killed in a car accident when the young parents-to-be were on their way to the hospital to have their first child. Amelia can't help but see Sam



Dook!
Dook!
Dook!



as a reminder of her dead husband – and, though she'd be reluctant to admit it, hold him responsible for his dad's death.

So the relationship between mother and son is already primed for a horrific breakdown when a strange storybook shows up on Sam's shelf (more on the book on pg. 21). When Amelia reads *Mister Babadook* to her son, the profoundly disturbing pop-up book heralds the arrival of its titular beastie – an entity inspired by fairy tale heavies and silent film monsters, that promises to insinuate itself into their lives. Amelia tries to destroy the book, but to no avail; it shows up again, with bonus material that writes her and Sam into the story, as murderess and victim. The Babadook soon invades their home, first manifesting itself as phantasmagoric visions and eerie sounds inspired by the silent films Sam often watches, and later inside the skin of Amelia herself as her behaviour becomes increasingly violent.

The Babadook, then, isn't simply a tale of a mother who turns on her child; it's a story about a woman whose grief is so all-encompassing that it takes on a horrifying life of its own, no matter how much she tries to suppress it. Adapted by Kent from her own 2005 short film *Monster*, it's equal parts haunted-house yarn, possession tale and subjective mindfuck. Eroding boundaries between dreams and reality conjure shades of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, but the movie's truest cinematic antecedents are the psychological horror films of Roman Polanski, particularly *The Tenant* and *Repulsion*. We begin to wonder if there's really a Babadook at all, or if Amelia has become so consumed by her grief and anger that she's become a mortal danger to her own child.

There's a lot to be said for Kent's mastery of old-school scare tactics and her commitment to in-camera effects, eerie sound design and creepy stop-motion animation, but it's Amelia's increasingly tenuous grip on reality that really makes the film so affecting. Kent's script, paired with exceptional performances by Davis and Wiseman, ratchets up the tension and threat of violence between Amelia and Sam until it hardly matters if there's a literal monster or not.

We spoke with the director via telephone from her Brisbane home, and asked her to help us peel back the layers of *The Babadook*.

HAVE YOU ALWAYS BEEN DRAWN TO THE HORROR GENRE?

I was a horror junkie from way back, from when I was a kid and I was watching movies I shouldn't have been watching at a very young age. I guess I started watching horror at around nine or ten years old, and really got hooked. I would watch things that were quite terrifying and not be able to get to sleep. It was kind of this compulsion. And I'm still like that; if I have a choice between a serious art-house film and a horror [film], I'll generally always go for the horror.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THOSE MOVIES THAT MADE A BIG IMPRESSION ON YOU AS A KID?

I remember seeing things on VHS like *The Amityville Horror* and *Friday the 13th*. You look at them now and they're quite cheesy, but at the time it was really something that terrified me, and got me interested in finding out more. *Halloween* and *The Thing*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* – all of those films really freaked me out. The monsters in them intrigued me and sent me back for more.

WHAT WAS THE GENESIS OF THE BABADOOK?

I'm a person who likes to face life square-on and, if difficulties come, I like to really try and experience them and process them. And what intrigued me was, what happens to a person if they suppress grief and difficulties and their shadow sides for so long? That was where the idea came from. And I didn't want it to be a kitchen-sink drama about someone coping with loss or depression. I wanted it to have a dream-like feel and a mythical feel, and that's how Mister Babadook was created. This woman pushes down on her grief so much that it splits off from her and develops a separate entity and that, for me, was really much more exciting than a straight drama approach.

THE BABADOOK HAS ITS ROOTS IN A SHORT FILM, MONSTER, WHICH YOU MADE IN 2005. WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO TURN IT INTO A FEATURE?

People are assuming that it was really clever to make a short of a feature I wanted to make, but that's actually not true. I never had the intention when I was making *Monster* to make a feature out of that story, but the story stayed with me. I worked on a number of other feature scripts in the meantime, but the story of facing one's dark side really

stuck with me, and eventually a feature film demanded to be made out of it, basically. And I just kept working the idea, and that's how it popped up.

THE FEATURE IS STYLISTICALLY VERY DIFFERENT FROM THE SHORT. FOR INSTANCE, THERE ARE SOME REALLY STARTLING JUMP SCARES IN MONSTER, AND THERE ARE NONE IN THE BABADOOK. DID YOU MAKE A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO STEER AWAY FROM THAT STYLE OF HORROR?

Yeah, I did, and some people really don't like that. They want the roller-coaster ride, and then they want to go out and forget about it. I wanted to create a story that, metaphorically, starts by putting both hands around your neck and then just keeps tightening and tightening until you can't stand it anymore. And then the film explodes, as Amelia does, and things go where they go. We had a brilliant editor as well, so it was very much about creating that tension in the edits. Horror and suspense – in any film, really – is all about rhythm. It's closer to music, I find, than it is to literature. And the wonderful thing about horror is that you can get people involved in your idea on a very visceral, physical level. That's its power, I think. Horror is so underrated and so abused – it's like the country cousin that everyone wants to kick and put in the corner. And that's such a shame because, for me, scary films are amongst the most cinematic, because they're closest in structure to a dream. In dreams, we don't have security. We don't know what's coming next.

THE RELATIONSHIP AT THE CENTRE OF THE FILM – BETWEEN A MOTHER AND HER CHILD – IS FERTILE GROUND FOR HORROR FILMMAKERS. WHAT ATTRACTS YOU TO IT?

The story, to me, was king and the horror elements were a result of the story. So I never thought, "Ah, it'd be great to do a mother-and-child story because people seem to like that in horror." That was never my intention. I have a very loving mother, thankfully, and I thought, "How terrible would it be to not have that love?" That, for me, is a true horror. It's obviously a horror for the child who isn't loved, but it's equally a horror for the mother who can't give that love for whatever reason. And that was why, I guess, I chose a mother and son for this story, because the fallout of suppression is not just fallout on the individual. It bleeds into every relationship they have – especially the relationship with their children.

MOST OF THE HORROR FILMS THAT EXPLORE THAT RELATIONSHIP – PSYCHO, CARRIE, ROSEMARY'S BABY, THE BROOD – HAVE BEEN MADE BY MEN, AND YOU BROUGHT AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE TO IT. HOW IMPORTANT IS GENDER IN TELLING A STORY LIKE THIS?

I'm very proud to be making films with complex female characters. And I guess I've made an unwritten commitment to continuing to do that with whatever films I make. I think that it's not about making every-

thing from a female perspective, but it's certainly about righting the tremendous imbalance that has been there since film was born. And I think it is becoming more balanced. It's funny because, as you would know, there's a huge female audience for horror. We obviously relate to it. We know fear intimately. We're drawn to watching films that scare us, and I think it's wonderful that women are finally getting the stories up on screen in every genre that they can relate to more. It's a really exciting time to be making films in that regard. And with Amelia, I've had lots of women contact me and connect with me and say how much they appreciated this character, but also a lot of men have really loved this character and responded to her, which is very heartening to me. When we right the balance in filmmaking, we right it for both sexes.

AMELIA IS A FASCINATING CHARACTER. AT TIMES, SHE'S MORE TERRIFYING THAN THE BABADOOK. IT'S A GREAT REMINDER THAT A CHARACTER DOESN'T HAVE TO BE LIKABLE ALL THE TIME TO BE SYMPATHETIC. THEY CAN DO AWFUL THINGS AND WE STILL FEEL FOR THEM, AS LONG AS WE CAN RELATE TO THEM.

That's right! In earlier drafts, I thought, "She's really annoying me. Why is she annoying me? Because she's so good!" And I thought, "She should lie – she should say her child is sick and then go shopping." These things really make me love her, because they're human. And I think that is, unfortunately, where a lot of sexism comes in in filmmaking is in the writing stage. As a writer, you get people going, "Oh, she's not likable. We need her to be more likable." And I totally disagree with this approach. I think we need to understand something about a character. They need to be empathetic, but we don't need to like them – we need to love them. And there is a difference. Some people don't like seeing a woman doing the things Amelia does in this film, and they hate the film for that reason. But I don't really care.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE MONSTER. MISTER BABADOOK HAS SOME DEFINITE SHADES OF LON CHANEY, AND WAS OBVIOUSLY SHAPED BY SILENT HORROR MOVIES. HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT DESIGNING HIM?

I started with the idea of suppression. What does it feel like? Well, it doesn't feel comfortable. And then I thought, "What things make me feel uncomfort-



Female Trouble: (Top to bottom) Amelia (Essie Davis) loses control, her avatar in the *Mister Babadook* book, and (opposite) Essie and Sam (Noah Wiseman) investigate a noise.

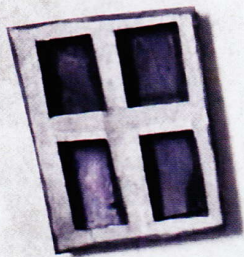
IT WAS VERY IMPORTANT THAT IT FELT LIKE SOMETHING SINISTER PLAYING AT BEING HUMAN.

- JENNIFER KENT

THE DESIGNER OF *THE BABADOOK* TAKES US THROUGH THE TERRIFYING STORYBOOK AT THE CENTRE OF THE FILM

A NIGHTMARE IN PAPER

BY APRIL SNELLINGS



EARLY IN THE PROCESS OF BRINGING *THE BABADOOK* TO THE SCREEN, WRITER-DIRECTOR JENNIFER KENT REALIZED THAT HER HORRIFIC CREATION WOULDN'T BE CONFINED TO THE REALM OF MOVING IMAGES.

To get the effect she wanted – an unnerving blend of live-action film, stop-motion animation and pop-up storybooks – she would need to actually create the book that serves as a catalyst for the nightmare that unfolds onscreen. To that end, Kent and her creative team turned to American illustrator and stop-motion animator Alex Juhasz, whose work they discovered in the Emmy Award-winning opening credit sequence of Showtime's *United States of Tara*.

Juhasz says he was initially skeptical about tackling the project when the filmmakers contacted him. He's been doing stop-motion animation for years, but *The Babadook* represented a big departure for him.

"When you're doing stop-motion, it's a completely different kind of work than [live-action] film," he explains. "With animation, each frame is a movement. But this had to be completely usable in real-life. So as far as that goes, this was a different challenge for me."

Juhasz came on board while the film was in the early stages of preproduction, so his work on the storybook helped shape both the look of the film and its titular demon. Kent always intended for the book to be much more than a prop; in fact, Juhasz spent two and a half months in Australia working with the filmmaker and her team, literally sketching out the world of *The Babadook*.

"It wasn't just about getting the book right," Juhasz says, "it had to fit into the larger look of the film, it had to be part of that world. Since they were still developing it, I got to feel like I had a lot of freedom to sort of find it. We looked at a bunch of stuff, and I tried to absorb it and just feed something back to Jen that sort of touched a nerve emotionally – using not necessarily the aesthetic styles that we

were looking at directly, but trying to capture the feeling of the references that she was giving."

Those references included silent horror films and very early sound films, particularly movies such as *Nosferatu*, *Vampyr* and *M*, which bore the distinct mark of the German Expressionist movement. Juhasz produced dozens of concept sketches to help Kent hone in on the elusive Mister Babadook – a shadowy, protean entity whose layers are slowly peeled away throughout the film.

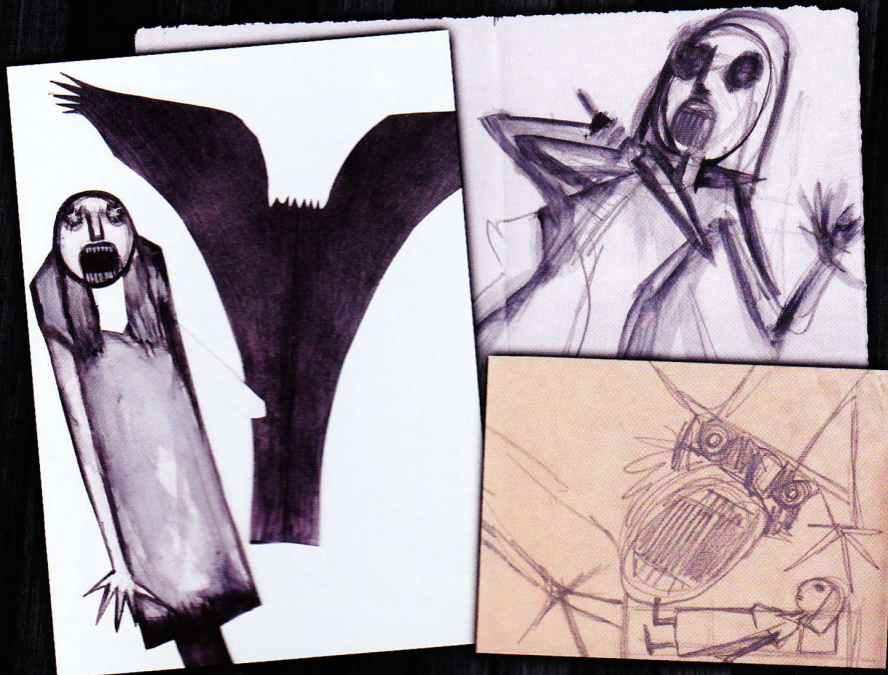
"I did a ton of sketches, and she'd sort of point to one and be like, 'Let's head down that road,'" he explains. "That's my favourite way to work – the process of elimination. I just kept refining it until it looked right to me, and then I'd bring it back to Jen. She was great, because she left me a large chunk of creative freedom."

Those parameters included the monster's dual na-

ture; the humanoid guise it takes at first, complete with top hat, wig and gloves; and the distinctly non-human monster that lurks beneath those mundane trappings.

"It has a fixed expression, and over time, it gets more horrible," Juhasz elaborates. "Jen and I talked a lot about the organic nature of whatever is behind the mask. It's not a person; it's almost like a collection of things, like sticks and hair, but also things like shadows and oil. And this is great food for making something. Those things all have their own tactile sense, but they also mean different things. That was really good direction, and a really cool vision from Jen. Finding something that's not quite in existence, that's almost attached itself to the corporeal world through affixing itself to this mask, like a poor imitation, or like an alien idea of what a man should be."

Tonally, Juhasz walked a fine line between two



very different aesthetics. He wanted to capture both the sense of wonder common to children's books, as well as the very old evil that lurks in the book's pages.

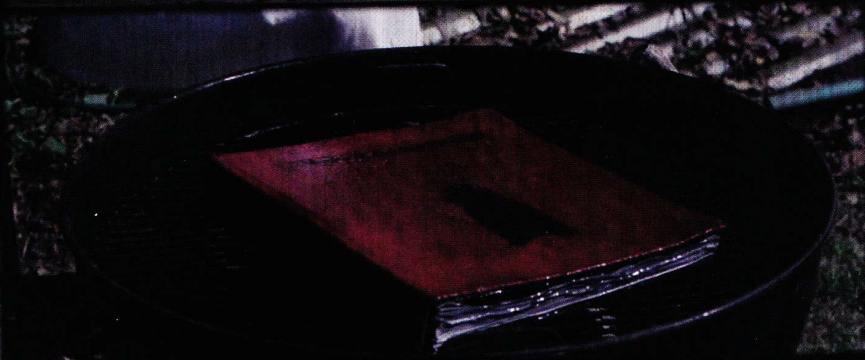
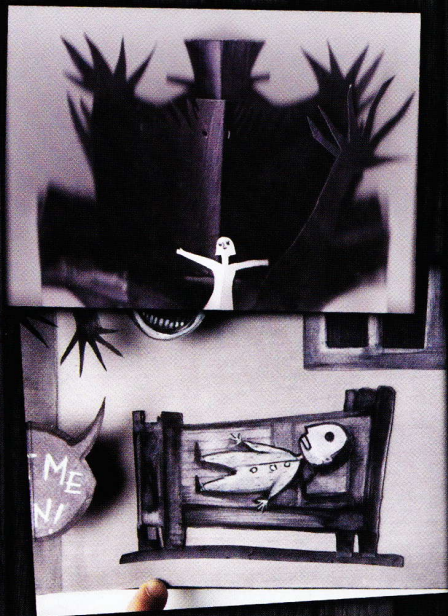
"I didn't want it to look too naïve," he says. "There should still be some sort of gravity, some sort of imprint of an older hand to it."

Kent composed the rhyming text of the book, which concerns a boogeyman that invades both the home and the mind of its victims. Juhasz created the mixed-media illustrations with inks, watercolours, coloured pencil and charcoals, and worked with a paper engineer to sort out the mechanics of the book's pop-up pages. He even opted to hand-paint the book's lettering when experiments with pre-existing fonts failed to produce the result he wanted. The painstaking process allowed him to devote many hours of attention to each individual image – a luxury he's rarely afforded in his animation work.

"It was just one book, so I got the chance to do one beautiful image, and then build it," he says. "With animation you have to keep re-making it."

The books that are seen in the film are handmade one-offs, but fans will hopefully have a chance to own their very own copy of *Mister Babadook*. This month will see the launch of an Indiegogo campaign to finance a 5000-copy run of the storybook; if the project is funded, it will send Kent and Juhasz back to the drawing board to finish their pop-up horror tale.

"In the film, the book is burned and trashed, and you don't get to read the end of it," Juhasz points out. "I'm gonna have to do a few more illustrations and work with a paper engineer to finish off the rest of it, and maybe alter it slightly so it makes sense in book form. I'm really excited about that. When we put it all together, we thought, 'I think people would want this!' I just hope they don't actually read it to their kids." 🐼



Charbroiled Babadook: The mysterious book is thrown on the barbeque in an attempt to get rid of it.

able?" It was cockroaches and bugs, and it was an abstract kind of progression toward things that I love, which [includes] silent horror and the world of children's books.

You're on the money when you say Lon Chaney. The image of this smiling, gruesome face from *London After Midnight* – it's Chaney's actual face, but he's done work to contort it so it looks like a mask. For me, the Babadook is two-layered. It's covered – it's a mask, it's a wig, it's got a hat and gloves. You can't see its hands, you can't see its feet. It was very important that it felt like something sinister playing at being human. And then underneath that top layer was the real Babadook. Not the Mister Babadook, but the real Babadook, and Christ knows what that actually is. That was very important to me, those two layers. So the top layer has much more of a childlike, silent film, Georges Méliès, early horror kind of feel, and then the layer underneath is something very adult and very terrifying.

THE BABADOOK INCORPORATES FOOTAGE FROM THE FILMS OF MÉLIÈS AND OTHER SILENT FILMMAKERS. WHY WAS IT IMPORTANT TO USE THOSE CLIPS?

I borrowed so much of his technique and approach and style, I just wanted to put him in there. I consider it an enormous honour to have him in the film, and have his work in it. And it was also a way to get more of the Babadook in and to make that whole style more cohesive. There's another silent film artist in there who was equally as brilliant as Méliès, a Spanish guy called Segundo du Chomon, who never gets any recognition.

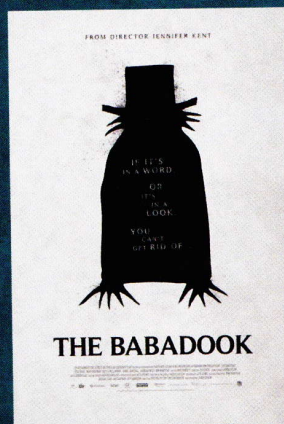
AND YOU TOOK OTHER CUES FROM MÉLIÈS AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES, BEYOND THE LOOK OF THE MONSTER...

Yeah, absolutely. Méliès' films have such a beautiful, childlike quality, but also a lot of them

are quite sinister. I loved his in-camera tricks and I didn't want to use high-tech [special effects]; I wanted to use low-tech camera tricks, because it mirrored the world of the book. I've heard some people say, "Ah, the special effects aren't very good," and I say, "Yeah, that's the whole point!" It was smoothed in parts, but there was a commitment to doing everything in-camera. The effects are like a dream to me. I wanted to create something that wasn't CGI – that was all handmade. Just for my tastes, it's more disturbing. People say, "If you had a bigger budget, what would you have done?" And I say, "Probably the same, we'd have just done it a little bit slower."

YOU MENTIONED THE DREAM-LIKE QUALITY OF THE FILM, AND IT DEFINITELY PLAYS WITH THE IDEA OF REALITY AS SOMETHING THAT'S PLIABLE. THAT CALLS TO MIND A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET.

Yes, that was a big film for me as a young kid.



DO YOU THINK IT INFLUENCED THE BABADOOK?

Not consciously. My conscious influences were the silent horror films, the films of Polanski, [and] David Lynch, for his tone and his bravery in conveying a dream world and being more abstract and not being afraid of that. Films like *Lost Highway*, in particular, were a huge inspiration for me. But then you get to a certain point in preproduction where

you don't want to look at films anymore, so I tried to throw those out and made a strong commitment and make it my film and not derivative of other filmmakers.

I'D LOVE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT THE STORYBOOK THAT'S USED IN THE FILM. HOW CLOSELY DID YOU WORK WITH ALEX JUHASZ, THE BOOK'S ILLUSTRATOR?



Evil Everywhere: (Top to bottom) Something nasty stirs under the bed, and a scene that exemplifies the influence of expressionist silent films on *The Babadook*.

We looked in Australia a lot [for an illustrator], but we couldn't find the right person. I kept using Alex's work as a reference, and then I said to [producer] Kristina Ceyton, "Why don't we just ask Alex?" He wanted to come to Australia and really loved the idea of the film, and so he came out and became a part of our very early preproduction. We started out with the book because, for me, the design of the film had to come from the world of the book so we needed to know what that looked like first. And then, as that book started to develop, the world of the film developed around it.

SO IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CINEMA AND LITERATURE THAT YOU FIND PARTICULARLY RELEVANT TO THE BABADOOK?

I wanted to find a way for the Babadook to come in through the child. For me, as a kid, storybooks held such an energy. I was so thrilled to read them and also scared by the stories in a lot of them, [such as] the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. I just felt like it was a perfect way to introduce this creature that changes throughout the film and gains momentum. So yeah, in this instance I think it's very important, the connection. I also love the work of Lotte Reiniger, who was a beautiful cutout artist. She was an animator; she made allegedly the first full-length animation ever called *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*. She would sit there and cut out all of her images by hand, and they were stop-motion and they were absolutely beautiful. So that was my styling point. If you look at her monsters, they're really crazy and you can tell they're handmade. There's something really beautiful about them.

She's a perfect example of the crossover between the world of books and the world of film.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT DESIGNING THE WORLD OF THE BABADOOK, AND TRANSLATING THE LOOK OF THE STORYBOOK TO THE FILM?

I can't lay claim to creating all of that on my own. It took a collaboration with a really genius designer, Alex Holmes, and also a wonderful cinematographer, Radoslaw Ladcuk, to create the world of the film. I started off thinking, "Do I want black and white?" much to my producer's horror. [Laughs] And then I came to the conclusion that I didn't actually want to shoot in black and white as I'd done with *Monster*. I wanted to create a world that felt somehow alive, but only just, and that still felt very cold – that people would feel like they needed to put on a sweater in the cinema. So the choice was to reduce the colours, to make it black through to white, but also to add very cool blues and light pinks through to burgundy. You'll see some teal thrown in there, but otherwise, that's it. And that was all done on location and on set. I think gels and a wash in post are very modern looking, and I didn't want that. It nearly drove poor Alex, the production designer, into the hospital. But we all feel that it was worth it, and it gives the film a look that not many films have.

THE MOVIE HINGES ON TWO TERRIFIC PERFORMANCES: ESSIE DAVIS AS AMELIA, AND NOAH WISEMAN AS SAMUEL. ESSIE IS A VERY ACCOMPLISHED STAGE AND SCREEN AC-

TRESS, BUT HOW DID YOU GET SUCH A STRONG PERFORMANCE FROM A SIX-YEAR-OLD?

I spent two weeks alone with Noah. I took him to the zoo initially, and I told him the story of The Babadook – the G-rated version. I said, "So basically, Noah, in this film Sam is trying to save his mum, and the film is about the power of love." And his eyes lit up, and he said, "Oh, the power of love!" And after that, he was totally committed like no other actor I've ever seen. His mum is a child psychologist, so she really felt the importance of the story. She was a huge supporter. I was an actor, like Noah, from a very early age. And kids of that age, they need to see. You need to show them, in a way, what's going on. So that's what I did with him, and it was a very exhausting shoot. He didn't know what a fit was – I had to get down on the makeup van floor and have one, and then he knew exactly what to do. He brought so much to that role, just through his natural abilities. Essie also has an extraordinary natural gift, but she has many years of expertise and skill now, so she also really helped get that performance out of Noah. She's an amazing, extremely underrated actress. She's extraordinary.

SOME STRIKING HORROR MOVIES HAVE COME OUT OF AUSTRALIA IN THE LAST DECADE, SUCH AS WOLF CREEK, THE LOVED ONES AND SNOWTOWN. HOW DO YOU AND YOUR FILM FIT INTO THE COUNTRY'S CINEMATIC LANDSCAPE RIGHT NOW?

We have a lot of questions here at the moment. We have a new government that's very right wing, and they're very, "Who needs films? Australians don't make films; Americans make films." What they fail to realize is, we do make films, and we create an industry here that goes on to dominate in places like America. You look at Cate Blanchett and Geoffrey Rush and countless film technicians, cinematographers, directors, actors. For a small country, we have a huge profile out in the world. So there's a big battle here at the moment – and it's been going on for a century, to be honest – to protect our industry. In that sense, I feel very passionate. I'm very aware of it. But creatively, I don't really know what's going on in the rest of the country, and I don't really care. I don't mean that in a derogatory way; it's just that I'm very much making my own thing regardless. I don't really consider myself part of an Australian horror clique or anything like that.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU? I HEAR YOU'RE WRITING A REVENGE FILM.

It's set in Tasmania in the 1920s. It's a horror world, but it's not a horror film. It's a frontier story, I guess. The character is a convict woman and it deals with our past. It deals with how violence affects women, both when they carry it out and when it's done to them. It's a film I feel very strongly about. It's gonna be a hard one to write – it's not an easy subject matter, but I think there's hope running through it, like in *The Babadook*. 😊