

Real fear in The Conjuring



By [Daniel Derksen](#)

18 Sep 2013

Fear is extremely real in *The Conjuring* and the scariest thing about the terrifying *The Conjuring* is its truth. Grounded in the reality, it is based on the true life story of how world-renowned paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren were called upon to help a family terrorised by a dark presence in a secluded farmhouse.



What makes *The Conjuring* truly frightening is that it is not an overloaded visual effects extravaganza, but that its hard core dramatic execution and realisation tells it as it is and delivers on all fear levels, without taking any short cuts. Films about haunted houses have been a firm favourites with audiences with classics like *The Haunting*, *House on Haunted Hill*, *Amityville Horror*, *The Devil's Backbone*, and, most recently, *The Woman in Black*.

The ghastly ghostliness of *The Conjuring* follows magnificently in the tradition of these classics, but adds an extremely amplified bonus with its inclusion of disturbing evil possession and demons in the tradition of *The Exorcist*, *The Exorcisms of Emily Rose* and, most recently, *Possession* and *The Evil Dead*. It's a double dose of horror infused with psychological suspense and alluring intrigue.

Dark heart and black soul



If this sounds all too much, it certainly is, and you will believe everything after journeying into the dark heart and black soul of *The Conjuring*. It is interesting that *The Conjuring* is, in a way, a prequel to *The Amityville Horror*, introducing us to Ed and Lorraine Warren, whose lifelong personal experiences combating inhuman forces garnered them respect in the field of demonology long before the immense popularity of the paranormal on the screen. And long before Ed and Lorraine tackled the foreboding menace in a little place called Amityville, they encountered the most perilous evil even they would ever come up against.

The real star of *The Conjuring* is Australian-born director James Wan, whose hands-on-direction and ingenious visualisation takes the film to the next level. Wan's intelligent direction and visual sensibility results in an experience that not only guarantees to grip you with fear, but elicits audible gasps during the film that you will definitely not forget.

A pulsating and mind-blowing visceral experience



Wan and cinematographer John R Leonetti (their fourth collaboration), perform miracles in *The Conjuring*, turning it into a pulsating and mind-blowing visceral experience that will have your pulse racing and adrenaline pumping. As co-creator of the *Saw* franchise (and directing the first episode), the most successful horror film series of all time, Wan's sixth feature film, *Insidious: Chapter 2*, is a follow-up to the very successful supernatural thriller, *Insidious*, that he co-created with long-time writing partner Leigh Whannell and will be released later this year. It is understandable why *The Conjuring* has been such an overwhelming success

internationally; made with a budget of USD20 million and released in America in July, the film has so far made USD271 256 610. Interestingly, *Insidious: Chapter 2*, was released in America on 13 September and with a budget of USD5 million, has so far taken USD40 million.

The Conjuring is not just a film about troubled ghosts or malevolent evil spirits, but, ultimately, the story of an ordinary family who became the unsuspecting prey of absolute terror in the 70s. When things go bump in the night it is enough to send chills running down your spine, but when you are deeply and mercilessly immersed in its horror in an intimate and personal way, the lasting impact is overwhelming.

Back to the 70s

It takes us back to the 70s in its telling and design. In fact, there are times when it feels as if the film was made then and simply reheated for contemporary audiences. The world of The Conjuring is magnificently brought to life by production designer Julie Berghoff, who collaborated with Wan on his three other films and followed his instructions and made us feel the presence of the apparitions, not see them. Its vivid characters are brought to life by a great ensemble of actors. As a renowned demonologist, Patrick Wilson delivers a natural tranquillity to the role that gives the character an eerie edge, with Vera Farniga delivering a terrific performance as Lorraine Warren, Ed's loving wife and preternaturally gifted partner Lorraine, who is swept along with her husband into the violent path of the malevolent presence. Ron Livingston and Lili Taylor are magnificent as Roger and Carolyn Perron, whose encounter with the paranormal, shared with the Warrens, changes their family for ever.

An ensemble of talented younger actors



Equally impressive are an ensemble of talented younger actors who play the Perron children, featuring Shanley Caswell as 18-year-old Andrea, Hayley McFarland as 15-year-old Nancy, Joey King as 13-year-old Christine, Mackenzie Foy as 10-year-old Cindy, and newcomer Kyla Deaver as 8-year-old April; and also Sterling Jerins, portraying the Warrens' daughter, Judy. Another memorable performance is delivered by John Brotherton as Brad, the local cop who is sceptical of the Warrens' abilities and methods, until he too is caught in the unearthly crossfire one night.

Shadows manifest into whatever we think we see in the dark and our belief in the unseen terror that rules The Conjuring becomes a true manifestation of our own fears, phobias and insecurities. The reality of its execution and the realism of its telling make The Conjuring an exceptional celebration of our fascination with supernatural forces and entities that feed our myths, fantasies, nightmares and fears.

Orchestrated fear in the hands of Wan is a thrilling experience, particularly if the manipulation is done with passionate insight and genuineness, not exploiting its subject matter, but being in full control of the beast that drives The Conjuring.

Conquering your fear in The Conjuring is not an option. Facing it definitely is. In the tradition of master suspense maestros like Hitchcock, Argento and Del Toro, the tension in The Conjuring is taut and brilliantly orchestrated. It's films like The Conjuring that take us on a journey of what we think we know, then take our comprehension and make mind-bending mincemeat of it, putting all logic and meaning through a blender. Don't be scared of The Conjuring, be petrified for then at least you have a basis to launch your fear from.

Behind the scenes

"The Conjuring" is Wan's fourth collaboration with director of photography John R Leonetti, who tested cameras and lenses to achieve this look, settling on a combination of the Arriflex Arri Alexa digital camera, which has the same latitude as film, is more sensitive to light, and can hold highlights and details in the shadows, and Leica lenses, which are optically flat and sharply and accurately represent what's actually there.

"The Arriflex camera is the first digital camera that is as vivid and graceful as film," Leonetti described. The fastest film ASA is 500. The Arriflex is easily 800 ASA. Combined with Leica lenses, wide open at 1.4, we could capture a flat realism without grain but rich with texture." For Wan and Leonetti, the use of practical lighting was vital to setting the tone. "We basically used a fundamental palette, creating natural light on many levels," explained Leonetti. Wan compares Leonetti's lighting skills to "brush strokes on canvas. It's just so beautiful. Very classic, Italian Renaissance-style, Rembrandt-like photography."

Wan thrusts the audience in the midst of the terror, choreographing those scenes in great detail. "If a character's walking down a hallway, I always have the camera behind, following, so the audience is walking with them and doesn't know what's ahead. If something pops out to startle them, the viewers will be startled as well. If they look into the dim corners of a room and think someone is standing behind the door, I want them to have a hard time looking at it, as well, asking themselves: Am I seeing someone there? I think that really helps to put them in the mindset of the characters."

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Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit www.writingstudio.co.za
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