



# SCARIES SUPERIOR

With sinister-sister horror *The Nun*, British director Corin Hardy is on a mission to get you reaching for the nearest prayer book

WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS



**IT WAS ON** the dark side of twilight when we got to Hunedoara. We had been directed to go to Corvin Castle, on the edge of the Poiana Ruscă Mountains. What sort of grim adventure had we embarked upon? In the gloom the courtyard looked of considerable size, and several dark ways led from it under great round arches. We were evidently expected, for when we got near the door we faced a rumpled, cheery young man in a distressed leather jacket, jeans, a Misfits T-shirt and Converse trainers customised with sparkling inverted crosses.

When we came close he grinned and said, "Welcome to Transylvania. Welcome to my castle. How often do you get to say that?"

Corin Hardy is not Dracula. For one thing, he is not immortal (that we know of). Neither, after sunset, does he crawl vertically downwards from his vertiginous bedroom window seeking throats to bite (again, as far as we're aware). But the 43-year-old British director does have a penchant for shadowy places, bleak secrets and matters macabre.

He is, you might say, a child of the

night, and the music he's making on this occasion is *The Nun*, the latest spin-off from the ultra-profitable *The Conjuring* franchise, and quite possibly the most lurid entry in the series to date. Taking place in the 1950s — though its ancient European castle-and-abbey setting lends it the look of a much earlier period — it follows two people of the cloth as they head to a Transylvanian priory on a Vatican-sanctioned mission to investigate the apparent suicide of a novice. There, they will encounter a terrifying otherworldly nun with a habit of scaring people to death.

The premise is gloriously pulpy. But Hardy is treating the project with deadly seriousness. The location of our meeting with him is just one example. While producer James Wan has called *The Nun* an ode to the films of legendary Italian maestro Mario Bava and to classic Hammer horror, Bava shot his European Gothics on studio stages such as Titanus Appia in Rome, while Hammer's Transylvania was a park in Essex. No such compromise for Hardy. Seated in one of the chilly inner chambers of an actual Transylvanian castle while taking a few minutes out from shooting, he claims he did scout other locations, but you suspect that was just due diligence. There will be studio work later on. But, he explains, "There's no substitute for the cinematic natural lighting and stillness and textures and colours of the real castle."

Hardy is determined to scare the hell out of you, and this expression of Vlad taste is only the beginning.

### THE DIRECTOR'S UNLIKELY

journey to this Transylvanian castle began in a less grand but not entirely unspooky place. It was a Sussex graveyard, where in 1993 a teenage Hardy shot a short film, *Hunters*, starring his father Noel as a Van Helsing type with an exorcism kit. While most of his peers were playing SNES, Hardy was busy with animation and Super-8 experiments, leading inexorably towards the extraordinary half-hour stop-motion *Butterfly*, which took him five years of work in a shed in the garden at his parents' home. He calls that dark but moving slice of urban Gothic "my tentative announcement of what my vibe is".

From the very beginning, there was a dark undercurrent to his work: Hardy has always loved what he calls "the limitless imagination" of horror films. When *Hunters* made it to a competition screening at the National Museum Of Photography, Film And Television in Bradford, he met his contemporary



Clockwise from left: Hooded terror: Sister Irene (Taissa Farmiga) is in for a frightful night; Director Corin Hardy in a grave on location at Corvin Castle, Hunedoara, Romania; Hardy tends to demonic nun Valak, played by Bonnie Aarons.

Edgar Wright for the first time, and the pair bonded over the grisly set-pieces of Sam Raimi. "He said, 'What's your favourite film?' And I went, '*Evil Dead II*.' And he said, 'Yeah, mine is as well,'" Hardy smiles. "That's how we became friends." The pair of wannabe filmmakers kept in touch, writing each other letters and meeting up at film festivals. Wright, who hired Hardy to work on costumes for his debut film *Fistful Of Fingers*, remains a regular cheerleader, calling Hardy's 2015 feature debut *The Hallow* "the kind of film I'd have been obsessed by if I had stayed up late to watch as a kid".

The films the young Hardy stayed up late to watch, besides *Evil Dead II*, included *A Nightmare On Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (he adored the Freddy-snake and string-puppet sequences), John Carpenter's *The Thing* (he was mesmerised by Rob Bottin's nightmarish creations) and pretty much anything that featured a monster. So fascinated was he by

among the cast and crew. "The guy is like, 'Let me show you what I mean,'" says *The Nun* screenwriter and executive producer Gary Dauberman. "And he's always got a little notebook and a pen: he can just draw what he's thinking and you're like, 'That's exactly it.' He considers what everyone's saying — he even listens to me occasionally — but he has a really distinct vision of his own."

### THE UNCANNY ORIGINS OF

*The Nun* can be traced back to 2016's *The Conjuring 2*, in which a terrifying nun, aka the dread demon Valak, popped up briefly to torment paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren (Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga). James Wan, that film's director and *Conjuring* overlord, saw an opportunity to make a spin-off prequel which would eke out even more menace from the black-clad wraith, moving the series away from its usual world of haunted

houses and possessed dolls into a more Gothic, European flavour of horror. But it was Hardy who looked at the premise — a road trip taken by Sister Irene (Taissa Farmiga, younger sister of Vera) and the stern Father Burke (Demian Bichir) to solve a convent-based mystery — and saw a different inspiration entirely.

"I made a list of films the script reminded me of," the director says, "and it was things like *The Name Of The Rose*, *Black Narcissus* and *The Exorcist*... but *Diana Jones* was top of the list." And so *The Nun* started leaning in another direction: not just a chiller but an adventure about detectives on an international mission. "I always liked things like *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*, where someone comes in and it's like, 'Here's what's going to happen and now please go do it,'" Dauberman notes. "I liked getting into the story quickly. Father Burke gets the call right away, travels to Rome and they lay out what's happening, and I very much had in mind that set-up at the college at the start of *Raiders*." Seemingly taking them back in time, Irene and Father Burke's quest takes them to Romania via plane, in an ancient car to a remote village, then finally up by horse and cart to the abbey. When there, all hell breaks loose. Hardy has been unleashed to indulge his darkest desires, with a hefty budget at his disposal to co-ordinate fearsome scares.

When *Empire* first arrives on set, there's little evidence of this: a flap of off-duty but fully made-up demon

appears to have won him many fans



Bonnie Aarons talks us through her role as *The Nun's* main threat

**How did you land the role of Valak, the demon nun?**

James Wan decided he wanted an extra monster in *The Conjuring 2*. The brilliant casting directors allowed me to audition. I was told it was an untitled James Wan film. It was between two men and me, and I was like, "No fucking way are they giving this role to a guy." I wouldn't even leave until I got the job. I was like, "What's there to think about?"

**Did you have any sense that they were thinking of bringing you back?**

No, not at all. I was just hoping I'd get to work with James again. I was thrilled to work with him. And now I'm thrilled to work with Corin. My God: what an artist.

**What's it like working under that make-up?**

The make-up is actually a tiny bit different every time because the phenomenal [make-up artist] Eleanor Sabaduquia paints it freehand. I wait for Corin to tell me what my face is doing. He and James are the geniuses that know how to make the scare. I just do what they tell me. I'm lucky I'm so gorgeous! Eleanor is known for her beauty make-up but this is her most beautiful masterpiece. I don't think I've ever looked better in my life.

**There are many nuns in this film. Is Valak actually the Nun of the title?**

Ahh, I'm not the one to answer that question. You'll get nothin' from me. But I'll tell ya this... I'm sure I'm everyone's favourite nun.



nuns loiter in the sunshine, wearing sneakers and sunglasses, while a bunch of bemused-looking tourists look on. It turns out that the production was only granted permission to use the location on condition that they keep the castle open to paying visitors. But as night falls and Hardy leads us through areas of Corvin Castle (in an eldritch example of synchronicity, 'Corvin' is, essentially, Latin for 'crow') where Joe Public is not allowed, things acquire a more sinister air. At the back of the castle, leading up to a convincing fake entranceway with its steps awash with blood, is a hill adorned with wooden crosses, appearing ever more eerie as the light dims. Hardy says that whatever he's asked for, production designer Jennifer Spence has delivered bigger.

"I thought we'd manage about 20 crosses here," he laughs, "but they were still going after about 400."

Castles, crucifixes, devils, spooky women... With all those accoutrements being parodied decades ago (Abbott & Costello films, *Carry On Screaming*), there's an obvious danger of tipping over into camp. Hardy says the trick to avoiding that is simply to treat the subject matter sincerely and uncynically. "It's scary and the actors are taking it seriously," he promises. "This isn't a pastiche and nobody's hamming it up. To me it's actually refreshingly straight, which, paradoxically is what makes it fun."

Hardy excuses himself to go and direct a sequence in a chapel on the castle's grounds, in which Sister Irene



finds the aforementioned, deathly silent sisterhood (now sans shades and sneakers) populating the pews in front of an altar adorned with a headless Christ. Valak herself is also present to menace her in a mirror's reflection. Despite the resources at his disposal, Hardy is shooting as much as he can in-camera. "It's a bigger movie in many ways than something like *The Hallow*, but it's also a grounded movie in that we're doing it all for real," he says. "There's very little CGI: actually less CGI even than *The Hallow*. We're concentrating more on complex choreography and mind-trickery." When the choreography doesn't work — Bonnie Aarons as Valak not exiting shot quickly enough, for example, and staying in frame to perform an impromptu soft-shoe-shuffle — he's relaxed enough to laugh with everyone else.

Away from the cameras, assorted crew are confronted with an interloper: a trapped bat, eventually restored to freedom thanks to the thick claw-and-fang-proof gloves of one of the grips. As we watch it flit towards the moon above the castle's turrets, we reflect that rescuing a bat in Transylvania must be some sort of good omen: that

or a grave mistake. But as luck would have it, just to be sure the production isn't cursed, the unit publicist has already arranged for the set to be blessed by an Eastern Orthodox priest.

The ceremony takes place the following morning, Hardy on the receiving end of some of the priest's liturgical actions. "I've got holy water in my eye," he blearily confides to *Empire*, before asking the holy man if we're all safe now. He's assured that we are.

*It was the eve of the summer solstice the following year when we once again encountered Mr Hardy. He was jolly and cheerful, and it was quite evident that recent events had helped to take some of the brooding weight off his mind, the curse of The Crow having passed away. We found him in a London hostelry, the prospect of beer having much excited him.*

This time there are no bats, no ominous cellars, no habit-wearing hell-sisters; we're in a British pub, and

not his local one in East Sussex where, Hardy says, he recently found "Valak" mysteriously carved into one of the tables. The only edge of otherworldiness comes in the form of a black cat, which sits on a chair beside us, asleep for the duration of the conversation.

Still looking more disciple-of-grunge than prince-of-darkness, Hardy is wearing the same leather jacket he had on on set. It still sports a button of Brandon Lee as *The Crow's* Eric Draven, despite the recent news that Hardy's version of *The Crow* has collapsed again, this time seemingly forever, with Hardy and star-to-be Jason Momoa both leaving the project. "It was heartbreaking," he admits. "I had everything in place to make the film I wanted to make, and we were only weeks from shooting, but circumstances conspired against it. The decision became that I'd rather not make it than make a bad version of it."

But after years of frustration, you do get the sense it's now a weight gone from Hardy's shoulders; in many ways it must have been liberating to finally walk away. And mere hours after *The Crow* died, the trailer for *The Nun* first manifested online, concluding with the mother superior of all jump-scares, eliciting a raucously appreciative reception.

For the first time in some years, Hardy finds himself without a definite 'next' film. And it's exciting. Monstrous projects of his own that he's been forced to neglect have suddenly loomed back into focus, and Hardy is in London taking meetings to figure out his next opportunity. It might be *Abominable*: the "Jaws of Yeti movies" that he's been lovingly plugging away at for 16 years. Or it might be one of any number of other ideas involving "arcane creatures, alternative dimensions, horror, noir, crime, sci-fi... all the dark stuff; all the good stuff". His eyes blaze with infernal anticipation.

When *Hunters* played that Bradford festival way back in 1993, the news made Hardy's local paper. The 18-year-old told the Sussex *Argus* he was "not interested in gore; I am more interested in concepts".

"I hate that I said that," he laughs now. "What the fuck was I on about? I think what I meant to say was, 'I fucking love gore. But I also love good ideas.'" Hardy's got plenty of those, and with luck they'll make it to the screen. It can't, as a moody rocker named Eric once said, rain all the time. ●

THE NUN IS IN CINEMAS FROM 7 SEPTEMBER

Clockwise from top left: She's behind you: Father Burke (Demián Bichir) is a haunted man; Jonas Bloquet as local villager Frenchie; Something demonic lurks in the Ice House.

Getty Images