



A LEGACY

UNNIES

JAMIE LEE CURTIS CAN'T ESCAPE MICHAEL MYERS.
AND SHE DOESN'T WANT TO.

BY DAVID CROW



JAMIE LEE CURTIS KNOWS THE IMPORTANCE OF HALLOWEEN AND THE BOOGEYMAN IT UNLEASHED.

She can feel their combined shadow when entering a ballroom at San Diego Comic-Con. Arriving slightly behind the other filmmakers she's partnered with to bring that boogeyman back, her presence causes the cavernous space filled with journalists to go quiet. All eyes are on the woman in a black blazer and horn-rimmed glasses. Next to me, *Halloween* producer Jason Blum murmurs, to no one in particular, that there is a queen.

"It is my life," Curtis says once she sits across the table, reflecting on the significance of her breakout role. "This is the greatest job I will ever have, and I know it. I knew it then, I tried to pretend it wasn't, and now I understand it is my absolute legacy, and I am thrilled."

Forty years after starring in John Carpenter's low-budgeted "Babysitter Murders" movie, Curtis now stands comfortably on the edge of 60, wistful about a career that was jump-started by a bloody knife. After all, that knife still earns her rapturous applause at venues like SDCC and the Toronto International Film Festival, where men, women, and children (with some fairly liberal-minded parents) walk around wearing T-shirts of Michael Myers, the masked "Shape" who first pursued her in the 1978 horror masterpiece. And despite a long career that includes classics like *A Fish Called Wanda* and *True Lies*, it is still her perennially resilient Laurie Strode that she and audiences come back to time and again.

Only 19 years old when she was cast in the original movie, Curtis was an actor of little experience but who came with a high pedigree in horror since her mother Janet Leigh starred in what is arguably the first slasher movie, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Such lineage was obviously a persuasive element when Carpenter and *Halloween*'s producers considered her for the part, but what truly made her embody Laurie was her intense humanity and an underplayed vulnerability, all of which suggested a tenacious teen who slowly realizes she's in a waking nightmare. In Carpenter's attempt to perfect what became the slasher movie formula with a mythical killer—one who is evil made flesh—he discovered a young woman who could be extraordinarily ordinary. Authentically so.

"Laurie Strode in the original movie was as great a part as a young actor could ever want to have," Curtis recalls

Jamie Lee Curtis'
Laurie Strode tries to
keep Michael Myers
from coming home.



while considering how just weeks prior to being cast, she was fighting for two lines a week on the TV show *Operation Petticoat*. “Here was an entire character fleshed out with fantasies and dreams, and repressions and vulnerabilities. I mean, it was gorgeous.” Curtis says she made a conscious choice to step away from Laurie and this bloodstained genre after 1981’s *Halloween II* to avoid typecasting, but she has never had anything less than affection for the Final Girl.

“I was raised around show business, I had parents who were actors, and I understood that you could get pigeonholed,” Curtis considers. “But I have never disparaged Laurie and am very proud of being Laurie Strode. [She] was a woman of substance and intelligence.” Intriguingly, the star additionally muses that the slasher heroine was less exploited than many roles she pursued in ostensibly “legitimate” fare. “All of a sudden they were like, ‘Oh, she looks really cute in a leotard,’ but my first role as an actor was probably my best role as an actor, because it really gave me a chance to be an actor.”

It was also the result of producers Irwin Yablans and later Moustapha Akkad taking a chance on young and hungry filmmakers like Carpenter and his friends.

Barely 30 at the time, Carpenter had two features under his belt and a desire to make Westerns when Yablans pitched the film school dropout a “Babysitter Murders” movie. And, as long as the film came in under \$300,000—it would later be raised to \$325,000 to pay Donald Pleasence’s fee—Carpenter could do whatever he wanted. This included bringing on Debra Hill as co-screenwriter and producer, and many more old chums from his days at USC.

Forty years on, it seems history has repeated itself. Perhaps for the first time since Carpenter’s one-and-done franchise kickoff, another auteur with plenty of film school friends is taking a crack at a *Halloween* sequel. David Gordon Green, a North Carolina School of the Arts alum, recalls acutely how important *Halloween* was to pals at his alma mater like Danny McBride, Richard Wright, and Christof Gebert, all of whom are collaborating on 2018’s *Halloween*. Traditional funnyman McBride even co-wrote the screenplay with Green.

“We just have a great affection for it,” Green says, “because of some of the stillness, the composition, letting a moment linger, incredible performances in a movie that could actually sustain great tension without using a lot of

in a pair of *Halloween* sequels between 1998 and 2002.

“David’s from the South and went to film school with all these guys, and John Carpenter is from the South-ish and he went to film school with Tommy Wallace and Nick Castle,”

Curtis says, mentioning the original *Halloween*’s respective production designer/editor and the actor who played Michael Myers.

“To me, the parallels of these two movies are wild, because at the helm were these two Southern boys who were film geeks and love it, so everyone who wants to work with them loves it.” That includes Curtis, who insists the whole appeal of *Halloween* circa 2018 is that it is not a “payday movie,” which the actress unapologetically admits she’s done. Rather, this is going back to recapture why Michael Myers was so scary to begin with, and why Laurie is still iconic.

In a certain sense, the latest *Halloween* is the homecoming

that Curtis imagined *Halloween: H20* would be back in ‘98. With that film, she unsuccessfully lobbied to bring back Carpenter and the late, great Hill, who passed away in 2005. Now via the 2018 revival, Carpenter is finally again involved after Green and McBride pitched a version of this movie to the legendary filmmaker. He is even executive producing and reprising the role of composer for the iconic theme.

“Every filmmaker would have a different approach,” Green says. “There’s so much to take from the body of the mythology, of the franchise that’s existed... What made our design so specific is that we were looking for his fingerprint and his involvement.” If he couldn’t get both Carpenter and Curtis to come back, Green insists this movie would not exist. “It’s easy to get excited about putting the Michael Myers mask on someone and putting a familiar, iconic theme song on top of those images, but if we couldn’t get the two godfathers of this universe reunited for another experience, to me it wasn’t going to be worth the risk.”

That risk paid off, from the set where Curtis greeted the original and now restored Michael Myers actor, Nick Castle, with the words “can you fucking believe this?” to the film’s euphoric premiere at Toronto last month. Earning a standing ovation upon their entrance, Curtis, Green, and Blum were among those who introduced the highlight of that festival’s midnight madness lineup. The mission statement of the film was also evident in the opening title cards where instead of seeing a smiling Jack-o-lantern, the credits are accompanied by a smashed and rotted pumpkin coming back to life. As it inflates like a malevolent balloon, the message is clear: *Halloween*, in all of its gruesome glory, lives again.



Michael Myers' mask has been weathered to look like 40 years have passed.

Jamie Lee Curtis' Laurie Strode always has an exit strategy in place these days.

the devices.” It, and slashers in general, were one of their most discussed subjects at a time when he and his friends formed a conclave that eagerly dissected all cinema, from classy to trashy, comedy to horror. “We were not as critical as audiences seem to be today. We just loved movies.”

This passion, along with work in the school’s film archive that led to him and McBride debating cinematic “excellence” and “atrocities” in their dorm, began a process that Green credits for his own eclectic career as a filmmaker. Understood today as a kind of storytelling renaissance man, he’s transitioned from stoner comedies like *The Pineapple Express* to rural American tragedies like *Snow Angels*. His narrative dexterity can befuddle some critics but impresses moviemakers. For instance, it was Oscar-nominated Jake Gyllenhaal, who worked with Green on the Boston Marathon bombing film *Stronger*, who first rang up Curtis to say she should hear this guy’s pitch for another *Halloween*.

Picking up the echo between Carpenter and Green, Curtis notes that it was the latter’s enthusiasm (and the screenplay) that convinced her it was worth returning to the role of Laurie Strode—a part she seemed to say goodbye to after appearing

LAURIE STRODE WAS A 17-YEAR-OLD HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WHO NOBODY PAID ANY ATTENTION TO. NOW SHE IS DEMANDING A MOMENT.”

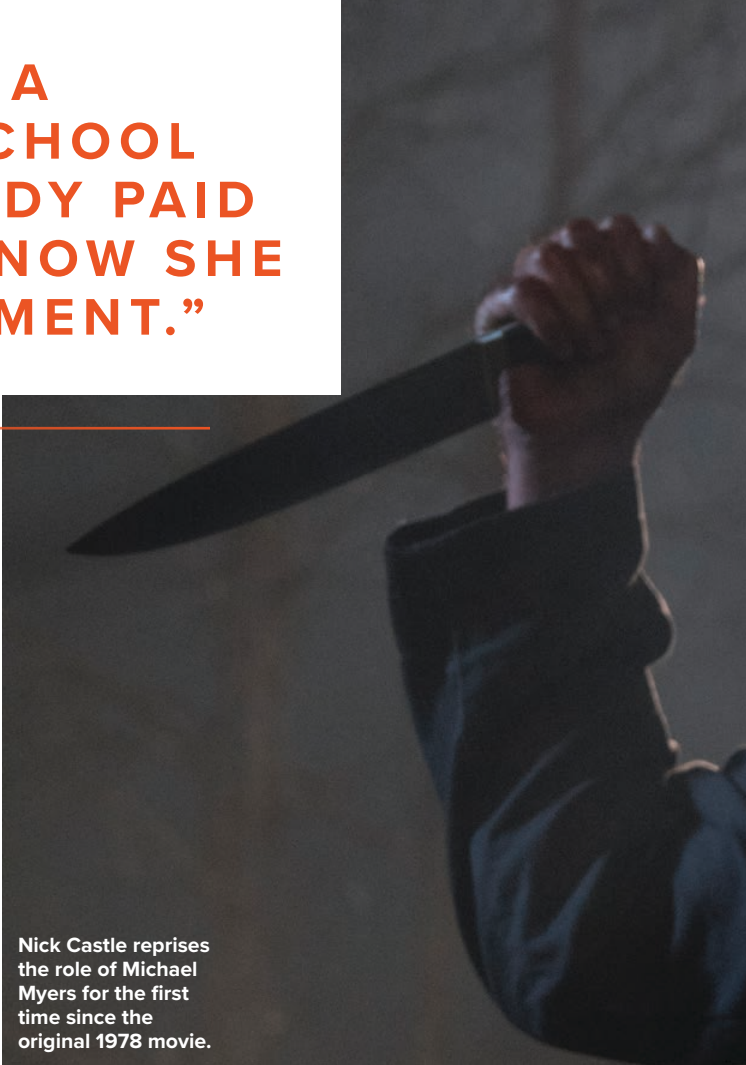
Hence why this is the first *Halloween* film to completely jettison every sequel, remake, and previous amendment to the Myers mythology. Ignoring all the movies but the first one, 2018's *Halloween* is the lone follow-up to remember that Laurie was not initially Michael Myers' sister. That was an element Carpenter and Hill wrote in a hurry for a "payday" *Halloween II* script that Carpenter has publicly regretted ever since. Curtis would seem to agree.

"The idea that there is nothing more terrifying in the world than a random act of violence, that is the root of terrorism," Curtis says. "Not that you see it coming, that something occurs in a horrible way, without you ever thinking it could happen to you." She concedes some fans, including Kevin Smith, love the idea of the murderous brother, but, for the star, what's really terrifying is not knowing why. "That's what David has so beautifully woven back, you left this woman with nothing and she's become the boy who cried wolf."

Indeed, we now find Laurie four decades older; she's become a mother and a grandmother. Still, picking up the baton of paranoia from the late Pleasence's Dr. Loomis, the ghost of Michael's Shape haunts her dreams every night. She knew he'd escape one day, and it has destroyed her life. Suggesting she was ahead of the curve, Curtis speculates what Laurie's parenting might have been like during her daughter's first day of school, demanding of the teacher "What is your exit strategy!?" Today, that sense of dread in parents and children is tragically commonplace, but for a woman like Laurie Strode who was ignored and overlooked in the '80s and '90s, white-knuckling her trauma alone, it was the impetus for two failed marriages and a loss of child custody. We find Laurie amongst this domestic wreckage when the 2018 movie begins.

"It's interesting that this movie coincides, beautifully, with this well-spring of empowerment and understanding," Curtis says while noting the movie went into production the same year that the #MeToo movement began. "Laurie Strode was a 17-year-old high school student who nobody paid any attention to. Now she is demanding a moment."

For his part, Green did not intend to write anything intentionally evoking the zeitgeist, but he thinks it's a sign the movie works if it taps into it anyway.



Nick Castle reprises the role of Michael Myers for the first time since the original 1978 movie.

"If we can take a step back, strip it down to the intimacy and simplicity of the man in the mask with a knife, I feel like we have something that will last forever on our hands." It's a feat echoed in the entire creative cycle of this project, which arguably began when Green sneaked a viewing of *Halloween* behind his parents' back at a childhood slumber party. Some 30 years later, he's standing on a set trying to bequeath that fear of the boogeyman to a new generation. And with Curtis still in the lead role.

While shooting one particularly crucial moment early in the film, where a beleaguered Laurie watches Michael Myers' prison bus seemingly drive him out of Haddonfield forever—making her lifetime of preparation for his return seem meaningless, and the gun in her hand attractive—Curtis found a rare solidarity among a crew who grew up on *Halloween*. While this sequence only exists for a few moments in the film, it was Curtis' last night on set, and a moment she'd been preparing for all day. As it turned out, so had everyone else, because when she appeared on-set, each crew member was wearing a "My Name is..." sticker with the words "We are Laurie Strode" scribbled in. Those



Judy Greer's Karen is comforted by her mother after finally realizing that the boogeyman is real.

stickers are a staple during the first days of any Jamie Lee Curtis movie, ensuring that everyone can connect with their co-workers, but now suddenly they were

all connected with her at her most vulnerable. Green credits the idea to assistant director Atilla Yücer, but its effect was felt most by Laurie Strode herself.

“What they were giving me was an emotional gift, that they were with me,” Curtis says, “that trauma, you know what I mean? We are Laurie Strode... that moment was one I will never forget.”

This month's *Halloween* will be the fifth time Curtis plays the woman who survived, but it might also be the experience she most reshaped in her own image. A little after our first interview, Curtis took a ruminative tone at the film's Hall H panel by saying, “I am 40 years older. I have raised two children; I have survived my husband and I for 34 years; and I have lost all of my adult family, parents, friends; and the reality of life is what makes stepping into a role 40 years later so easy.

Because it's just emotions and human feelings.”

Her truism was proven correct during the Q&A portion of the panel where the first fan to come up

simply identified himself as Joseph and revealed, in his own words, that Jamie Lee Curtis saved his life. Recalling how he once endured a home invasion, the fan vividly remembers in a moment of panic asking himself, “What would Jamie Lee do?” before running out into the night and screaming at the neighbors' houses, a la Laurie Strode. Rather than vocalizing her response, Curtis strode off the stage and into the crowd, embracing the man with tears and kindness.

Curtis would later tell us she came to San Diego to talk about fiction, but it's impossible to separate it from the non-fiction it influences. And in that private moment, she only had words for him. The queen comforted her court, and Laurie's legacy grew. 🍷

Additional reporting by Don Kaye.