

Manhattan end game a challenge

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The Will Smith movie *I Am Legend* takes place in 2012, three years after a botched cure for cancer wipes out the human race. Everyone, that is, except military virologist Robert Neville.

When first we see Neville (Smith), he's joy-riding in a 2007 Mustang, careening through the streets of a Manhattan that has grown over itself from abandonment — weedy, dusty and haunted.

"The minute I saw the trailer I couldn't wait to see it," PBS talk show host Tavis Smiley told Smith on his show.

I Am Legend, based on the 1954 sci-fi novella by Richard Matheson, has been something of a Hollywood hot potato for the past decade-plus; it once was in the hands of Ridley Scott, director of the dystopian classic *Blade Runner*, to star Arnold Schwarzenegger from a script by Mark Protosevich.

It was later attached to Smith and director Michael Bay (*Armageddon*) before falling to 37-year-old Francis Lawrence, a long-time music video director who'd worked with Smith on a *Men in Black II* video.

Lawrence made his debut in features with 2005's *Constantine*, a neo-noir, neo-goth film starring Keanu Reeves. He landed the job after lobbying to do the movie for close to a year, overcoming, he says, Reeves' edict of no first-time directors, no video directors.

The *I Am Legend* source material was not a natural for Hollywood. Given the cataclysmic set-up — and the dark, allegorical pay-off at the end of the novel — it is surprising to hear Lawrence say that he wanted to make a movie about hope.

"When you read the novel, I mean, it very much plays like a *Twilight Zone*, which is part of what's hard in translating it to a feature," said Lawrence, the son of a California State University, Northridge, physics professor. "To translate it to film, if you were to do it direct, it feels more like a short. Structurally, it doesn't have the same motor that pulls you through."

In the novel, Neville is of English-German descent; he smokes and drinks and unwittingly falls for one of the mutant vampires, who has been sent as a spy. Matheson, a regular contributor to Rod Serling's TV series *The Twilight Zone*, ends his story with a "Zone"-like reversal.

After his opening joy-ride, Neville hunts wildlife (the animals inserted digitally, which Lawrence referred to as "the wilderness pass"). Amid this strange frivolity, the character must cope with extreme social deprivation, assigning himself errands and routines to get through his day. It is this character aspect of the story to which the film tries to remain true, while offering the audience the reliable thrills of a Will Smith movie.

"We all had to lay out what was important to us in making the movie and what kind it was going to be," Lawrence said of his union with Smith and screenwriter-producer Akiva Goldsman.

"And we all landed on the idea that we wanted to make a character piece . . . we had tonal discussions, and, you know, it became very clear. Will and I especially were always talking about movies like *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, and movies that were sort of told in a simpler fashion and, you know, took their time."

I Am Legend was shot in Manhattan at weekends. Lawrence said streets were blocked off at close range to evoke a sense of desolation; what wasn't achievable from a longer view was done through visual effects.

Still, there are glimpses of the city that are eerily evocative of September 11, 2001 — the streets devoid of people, cars coated in dust — though Lawrence said he sought to avoid the association.

In previous Hollywood epochs, *I Am Legend* was adapted into *The Last Man on Earth*, starring Vincent Price, and *The Omega Man*, with Charlton Heston.

"I was thinking yesterday that the grandparent of this movie is *Silent Running*," said Goldsman, referring to the 1972 sci-fi film starring Bruce Dern as an astronaut alone in a spaceship with the last remnants of animal and plant life.

On *I Am Legend*, Goldsman shares the screenwriting credit with Protosevich, who opted not to work on the adaptation that would ultimately make it to screen, Goldsman said.

The problem remained: how to take what is by today's standards a sci-fi throwback and blow it up into a contemporary Hollywood blockbuster without blowing apart the spirit of the original.

Goldsman (Mr. and Mrs. Smith, *The Da Vinci Code*) is at once an admirer of those old-school sci-fi twists and dubious about translating such tales — "O Henry endings," he called them — straight to the screen.

"That tradition of that kind of reversal is great," he said, "(but) you gotta be very careful with it. *The Sixth Sense* pulled it off. It's very hard to do in long form."

Goldsman said how much had changed in the genre in the time it took to remake *I Am Legend* — zombie movies were popularised and sci-fi established enough to be parodied. And yet dystopia still remains a somewhat forbidden place. How many movies, these days, chance to end on chilling or discomfoting notes of social commentary?

While not disavowing the idea of them, "I think that truly hopeless movies, truly profoundly hopeless movies, are an exercise that I'm not interested in," Goldsman said.

"Life is difficult enough. Movies are fundamentally entertainments."

I Am Legend opens on January 3.

PAUL BROWNFIELD