



Frank Ockenfels 3 for Rolling Stone

HOME > TV & MOVIES > TV & MOVIES FEATURES

The All-American Nightmares of Jordan Peele

How do you top a movie that shook Hollywood? The auteur behind 'Get Out' has a simple plan: Scare the hell out of you

By **BRIAN HIATT**

JANUARY 29, 2019



As usual, **Jordan Peele** knows exactly where he's going. "What we should do," he says, with real enthusiasm, "is head to Hogwarts. Get some butterbeer. The Harry Potter ride is dope." Peele has a movie he's supposed to be editing, a burgeoning production company to run, an adorably talkative 17-month-old son waiting at home, but he's slipped away from it all for a couple of hours on a Monday afternoon in early December with obnoxiously perfect West Coast weather. His assistant just dropped him off at Universal Studios Hollywood, a theme park that still thrills him, despite the fact that he is an actual, Oscar-winning filmmaker for the actual Universal Pictures, which is putting out his second film as a writer-director, the full-bore horror flick *Us*, on March

SEE ALSO

[Jordan Peele Invades the Western With 'Nope,' a Thrilling Salute to Spectacle](#)
[There's Something Above the Clouds in Final Trailer for Jordan Peele's 'Nope'](#)



Subscribe today to get unlimited Rolling Stone access. See My Options



Photograph by Frank Ockenfels 3 for Rolling Stone.

Frank Ockenfels 3 for Rolling Stone

He has always been a world-class — a *galaxy*-class, a *multiverse*-class — pop-culture nerd, much to his creative advantage. (“He’s *such* a geek,” says Lupita Nyong’o, one of the stars of *Us*, who received a 10-film horror curriculum, from *The Shining* to the 2008 vampire movie *Let the Right One In*, before production began. “He’s extremely studied — he spent his life preparing to be this person for us.”) He also used to be “the world’s biggest weedhead,” his only real vice, but quit around the time he started dating his wife of two years, the comedian Chelsea Peretti — so it’s hard to blame him for taking his fun where he can find it these days.

“This is the kind of shit that I just loved as a kid,” Peele says, en route to Universal’s re-creation of quaint, cobblestoned Hogsmeade, the village where Hogwarts kids take magical study breaks. “I still have that feeling when I come back.” His mom, an office manager who raised him on her own on New York’s Upper West Side, was never able to afford a Disney trip, but she did have a work event when he was 12 that scored them a couple of days at Universal in Orlando — which, for a movie-obsessed kid, felt like a real

At 39, Peele is too old to have grown up on *Harry Potter*, but as a lifetime connoisseur of all things fantastical, he's adopted the franchise into his pantheon. As always, though, his is a critical, tough-love fandom, ever attuned to race and class, to the untold flip side of the story: An incisive sketch on his old Comedy Central show, *Key & Peele*, centered around a desperately underfunded inner-city wizard school where the junior magicians resorted to riding Swiffers instead of broomsticks.

On his way into the faux-Hogwarts, which hosts a ride called Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, Peele grins at a 48-inch-high sign warning "You must be at least this tall to ride." "I've been trying to pitch a *Get Out* ride," he says. "It's my ongoing joke — 'You have to be this color or darker to enter.' I don't know how they would do it." He pauses. "But someday, I'm going to have a ride."

Jordan Peele: The Rolling Stone Cover

Jordan Peele is featured on the February 2019 issue of Rolling Stone. Go behind the scenes of hi...

It would be unwise, given his career trajectory, to doubt him. *Get Out* was a layer cake of subtextual meaning, directed with Hitchcockian precision — a thriller in which every single white character turns out to be evil, as a weekend of micro-aggressions escalates into the attempted removal of part of the hero's brain. It pushed audiences of all stripes to embrace a young black man's perspective, launching national conversations about race, even as its terrifying limbo, the Sunken Place, entered the culture as metaphor, meme and nightmare. Peele made the film for less than \$5 million; it grossed more than \$250 million worldwide, making him one of the most in-demand filmmakers alive. Endlessly entertaining, yet smart enough to serve as fodder for op-ed pieces and sober NPR discussions, it hit a rare high-low sweet spot. It was also a sci-fi/horror genre piece with a

Short of actually winning the Best Picture Oscar — it took home Best Original Screenplay instead, making Peele the first African-American to ever win that award — it's hard to imagine how *Get Out* could have been more of a success. Still, Peele says, "I'm such a horror nut that the genre confusion of *Get Out* broke my heart a little. I set out to make a horror movie, and it's kind of *not* a horror movie." It is, instead, more of a sophisticated "social thriller" in the vein of *The Stepford Wives* or *Rosemary's Baby*. "As a horror fan, I really wanted to contribute something to that world."

Us, his new movie, is that contribution, unambiguously so. *Get Out* is existentially terrifying; *Us* is spill-your-soda scary. It's the tale of a family facing off with unsettling doppelgängers of themselves, which Peele calls the Tethered — he means them to be a "monster mythology," in keeping with Universal's Frankenstein/Dracula/Wolfman tradition. He's taking some mischievous pleasure at the prospect of freaking out some of *Get Out*'s more genteel fans.

Directing Daniel Kaluuya on the set of 'Get Out.' Peele acknowledges the film is haunted by an absent father, much as his own childhood was. "I try to dive into my worst fears headfirst in these movies," he says. Photo credit: Justin Lubin/Universal Pictures

Justin Lubin/Universal Pictures

With *Us*, he takes a step away from direct commentary on race, despite what many of his fans might expect. There is a powerful statement, however, in the simple fact that the terrorized family at the story's center is black. Nyong'o plays the mom; Winston Duke, *Black Panther*'s M'Baku, is the dad; they and the actors playing their kids also take the roles of their shadow-selves, which posed both artistic and technical challenges. But Duke, whose imposing physique tends to typecast him, was particularly thrilled to be

has a lot of insecurities and weaknesses.”

“It’s important to me that we can tell black stories without it being about race,” Peele says. “I realized I had never seen a horror movie of this kind, where there’s an African-American family at the center that just *is*. After you get over the initial realization that you’re watching a black family in a horror film, you’re just watching a movie. You’re just watching people. I feel like it proves a very valid and different point than *Get Out*, which is, not everything is about race. *Get Out* proved the point that everything *is* about race. I’ve proved both points!”

ADVERTISEMENT

We get on the Harry Potter ride, which is, indeed, dope, if slightly nausea-inducing. It’s also surprisingly intense, with creepy Dementors right in your face. “It’s pretty scary,” Peele says, with deep professional regard. Afterward, as promised, Peele finds a cart where we can get frozen butterbeers — essentially, butterscotch Slurpees. He drinks only half of his, which is still more carbs than most Hollywood actors would allow themselves in a month. As it happens, he’s put his acting career aside, other than a plan to introduce episodes of the *Twilight Zone* reboot he’s executive-producing — and he was hesitant to take on Rod Serling’s old role, fearing it was “self-aggrandizing.”

He looks, at the moment, like a man who’s relieved to be off camera, with an untamed, prematurely silver beard creeping up his cheeks — at one point, one of the theme park’s designated characters, Dracula, leans in and asks if we’re wolfmen. Peele is wearing a lot of Jordan Peele merch: a blue *Us* crew hoodie over a black T-shirt with the logo of his production company, Monkeypaw, and a dad-ish baseball cap with the words “Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk” beneath an image of a roller coaster — he filmed some of *Us* by that beach.

Peele’s son was born five months after *Get Out*’s release, just as it became clear he was reaching a long-dreamt-of career summit. As we wander the park, heading toward its *Simpsons*-themed world, Peele explains that for him, having a kid meant “realizing that you’re no longer the main character of your story and that there’s more important things than work. It was terrifying at first because I’ve worked so hard to get to this point, but there’s also something really nice about lifting the pressure off. It helps free me up, creatively, in some ways. It allows you to take more risks because failure is not the worst thing in the world anymore. It pulls away some of the stakes in a way. As long as we’re comfortable and he’s happy and my family’s good, that’s what’s important.”

It feels like every move, every line has such high stakes. If I don't look good in that shot, oh, I've ruined my chance at getting another gig. If I deliver this line well, OK, I made it. It's this crazy roller coaster, amazing one day and then awful the next. But ultimately a ride I wanted to get off."

ADVERTISEMENT

Peele likes to write perched on a couch, hunching in unergonomic fashion over his laptop for hours on end. Earlier this decade, when he was a sketch-comedy TV star contemplating a bold and unlikely career shift, he'd get high, sit down and tap away at draft after draft of a screenplay he initially called *Get Out the House*, after the old Eddie Murphy routine about how a black family would react to the events of *The Amityville Horror* or *Poltergeist* (they would leave immediately, Murphy assured us).

Key & Peele, his show with his friend Keegan—Michael Key, made him famous; his perfect Barack Obama impression, with Key playing his “anger translator,” Luther, won the favor of the president himself and became the show's signature bit, though no actual fan would rank those rather repetitive sketches among its best. (Peele's mimicry skills came in handy on the set of *Us* — when the actors needed to interact with themselves, playing against performances they had just given as their own doppelgängers, Peele would re-enact their line delivery off-camera.)

Peele's impression of Barack Obama in the recurring 'Key & Peele' sketch about the president's "anger translator" won raves from Obama himself. Photo credit: Ian White/Comedy Central

Ian White/Comedy Central

Get Out was an idea Peele had been turning over in his head for years, starting well before *Key & Peele*, but it shared the brainy, absurd, deconstructionist DNA of the show's best sketches (racist zombies refuse to eat black people; two stereotypical, self-proclaimed "magical negroes" do supernatural battle over the rights to cheer up a bummed-out white dude). He worked on it for years, "doubting myself and walking away for three months at a time." He went through more than 40 drafts, building a clockwork structure stuffed with Easter eggs that would reward multiple viewings (watch the early appearance of the

first place.

“We were really into macabre, Gothic shit,” says Ian Cooper, Peele’s best friend in high school, and now Monkeypaw’s creative director, after a long career as a sculptor and NYU instructor. “He is such a gifted improv comedian, and so many people said to me, ‘Oh, my God, so now he’s a horror-movie director?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, but that’s what made sense.’ If you had told me he was going to be a famous comedian, I would have been like, ‘Maybe. He’s hilarious.’ But this is actually more connected to his creative origin story.”

ADVERTISEMENT

Peele nods when I point out that *Get Out* is haunted by a character hardly mentioned in the film: the absent father of Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), the protagonist. “The missing father is in a way the phantom hanging over a lot of that movie,” Peele says. “You take the moment when his mother died, when she didn’t come home, and he didn’t know whether to call the cops. This was a moment where he was left to do what presumably another parent figure would have figured out. It haunts Chris, even though he doesn’t quite come to full terms with that.”

Peele’s own life was shaped, in part, by the same absence. “I try to dive into my worst fears headfirst in these movies,” he says — and the idea of a single mom never returning from work one day, leaving her son alone and terrified, has got to qualify. Sometime around Peele’s seventh birthday, his father fell out of his life. They were so out of touch that when his dad died in 1999, Peele didn’t find out until a couple of years later, and couldn’t fully process the news at first. “It wasn’t until many years later that I had a good cry about it,” he says.

We are having this conversation in Peele’s memorabilia-packed office in the Hollywood Hills, in a house Monkeypaw has otherwise mostly abandoned for more spacious headquarters. Right next to us are the brown leather armchairs from Catherine Keener’s character’s office in *Get Out* — a weeping, frozen Chris sat in one of them as he glided into the Sunken Place. The furniture makes me self-conscious about my line of questioning.

Peele’s Oscar stares down at us from a glass cabinet that also holds the movie’s floral teacup and the purse Allison Williams pretended to fumble with in the “You know I can’t give you the keys, right, babe” scene. The bookshelf is full of “every screenwriting book” along with novels by the likes of Stephen King and Neil Gaiman. On the wall is a black-and-white image of a knife-wielding Mia Farrow in *Rosemary’s Baby*; near his desk are the framed floor plans of the *Psycho* house, a gift from Universal.

At age 21, Peele moved to Amsterdam to join the Boom Chicago improv group, whose alumni include Seth Meyers and Jason Sudeikis. Photo credit: Lucinda Williams
Lucinda Williams

Peele has acknowledged he was left with a degree of identity confusion; his dad was black, but he was raised entirely by his white mom. The other effects of a fatherless childhood are harder to pin down. “So much of that pain is internalized,” he says, “and you don’t really notice it until you’re watching some movie where there’s a father-and-son thing that you just start crying for no reason, or a moment of hanging out with my son and sort of imagining if I wasn’t in his life. There are moments where I have that feeling, but the vast majority of my life has intellectually just not been preoccupied with it, and therefore I felt free from that emotion. But I find that a lot of my work deals with those themes. So I’m definitely working it out.”

ADVERTISEMENT

As a kid he’d get scared at night, which may have been connected to it all. “I think I conjured these images of monsters in closets, that kind of thing,” Peele says. “It was a pretty emotionally crippling phase.” He broke free of it, significantly, by telling a terrifying story of his own invention (it involved a stalled car, a severed head and some creepy chanting) around a fire on a class trip. “They all just shuddered, and I remember, after that, feeling kind of invincible,” Peele says. “Not even invincible from pain or being

moment. I felt like I was a kid before that story, and a man afterward, in a really profound sort of cathartic moment. I ended up spending so much time in comedy, but that really stuck with me as the most cathartic piece of art I've ever done."

Peele always felt an unusual amount of freedom to determine his life's path. "One of the bonuses of not having a father around," he says, "was I didn't have to answer to some dude who had an idea of what I should be putting my time and focus in." It was clear from early on that he was some variety of artist. He was a gifted draftsman, attending life-drawing classes; he also did amateur theater as a young kid and took an early stab at pursuing acting professionally. "I believe I had a manager or an agent when I was probably 12 years old," he recalls. "I would go on auditions and not really get anything and had a hard time dealing with rejection." He was, in other words, "a failed child star. One hundred percent."

As a ninth grader, he got a scholarship to the private Calhoun School and found an artsy group of friends. He had a goth phase, listened to Tool and Nine Inch Nails, wore black. They made a camcorder movie series called *Planet of the Beasts*, starring their old toys, "sort of *Jurassic Park*-inspired nonsense," says Win Rosenfeld, another high school friend, now Monkeypaw's president. "We're literally smashing a tyrannosaurus rex against a Luke Skywalker, and Jordan could elevate it into something funny and scary and weird and original."

ADVERTISEMENT

Peele wanted more than anything to go to NYU film school and become a director. "I knew I could do it if I got the education and the training," he says. "I knew I could be great at that." But for perhaps the only time in his life, he lost his nerve — he wanted it too badly to even try. Instead, he applied early to Sarah Lawrence, got in with a scholarship, and settled on a self-designed major in the highly lucrative field of puppetry. "In my first couple of years," he says, "I was picturing doing some avant-garde, probably horror-comedic-themed puppetry in Lower Manhattan somewhere." Instead, he shifted gears yet again, getting deep into improv on campus and dropping out after his sophomore year to move to Chicago, aiming for that city's Second City comedy scene. He was quickly recruited for Boom Chicago, an improv troupe actually based in Amsterdam, where he spent three fantastic, perma-stoned years, though it took him a while to figure out how to approach Dutch women. On a sojourn back to the real Chicago, in 2003, he met Keegan-Michael Key, and set off toward his destiny.

out behind us and lets out a roar. It's starting to feel like the inside of Peele's head out here. He asks if I've ever seen the Japanese prank shows where they unleash a similar dinosaur on unsuspecting office workers, and pulls up a YouTube video of a terrified young man sprinting away from one. Peele laughs hard, which doesn't happen all that much. "There's something about watching somebody truly believing that's real. . . ."

Peele wasn't exactly dinosaur-in-his-office terrified about making his second movie, but he certainly worried about the prospect of a sophomore slump. (He was tempted by the big-budget franchises dangled in his direction, but declined them all: "I only have so much time.") "There was definitely fear of having to live up to a movie that worked so perfectly," he says, not quite laying personal claim to the emotion. He looked closely at the second films of some of his favorite directors — finding particular inspiration in M. Night Shyamalan's palette broadening between *The Sixth Sense* (technically not his first movie, but it might as well have been) and *Unbreakable*. He also took note of how Quentin Tarantino expanded his worlds between *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*.

Peele with comedian and 'Brooklyn Nine-Nine' actress Chelsea Peretti, his wife of two years, at the 2018 Academy Awards. Photo credit: Chelsea Lauren/REX/Shutterstock
Chelsea Lauren/REX/Shutterstock

ADVERTISEMENT

Shyamalan himself recognized Peele as a kindred spirit, sending a message to him through a mutual friend, *Get Out* and *Split* producer Jason Blum. "Tell the story you want to tell," he wrote, as Peele recalls. "Don't listen to everything around you. Go back to what drove you to write the first one."

Back in his stoner days, Peele brainstormed enough big ideas to last a good chunk of a career. ("Thanks, high me!" he says.) More recently, he came up with four ideas for social thrillers in the vein of *Get Out*. *Us* started as one of them, but evolved out of that category

her duplicate in a bus station and becomes convinced it arrived from a parallel universe, bent on replacing her. “It’s terrifying, beautiful, really elegant storytelling,” Peele says, “and it opens up a world. It opens up your imagination.” He spent six months breaking down his script in his head and another six writing — a substantially shorter gestation period than *Get Out*.

“I gotta wait until I can see the movie in my head till I write it,” he says. “There’s a couple of things you’re armed with in the second one that I wasn’t in the first one. One, knowledge that it can work and this is not going to be a fool’s errand, if I do it the right way. That’s a lot of momentum. That makes up for a lot of that eight years. And you’re also a better storyteller because you’ve learned so much with the last one. The big question here for me, in my second feature, is: What do you hang onto as a signature style and what do you differently?”

In the makeshift digital-editing room down the hall from his office, Peele and *Us*’ editor, a friendly, soft-spoken guy named Nicholas Monsour, sit me down and show off 14 or so harrowing minutes of the film. I’m one of the first outsiders to see any footage, and Peele watches my reactions carefully. “Jordan talks about how horror and comedy are the two main genres where we have an involuntary bodily response,” Monsour tells me later. “You’re either laughing or you’re jumping, and there’s that tension-and-release thing that many jokes work with, as does horror. And they both mess with the nervousness around taboos.” (At one point, he asks Peele if he wants to go over the score for a “handcuffed-to-the-bed scene.”)

ADVERTISEMENT

The scene they show me is the full version of the home invasion by the family’s doubles, as hinted at in the film’s first trailer. The shadow selves are extremely disquieting; particularly Nyong’o’s slithery, scissor-toting villainess (“I had to go to some dark corners of my being,” she says). “She carried this anticipatory gravity in that scene where you just know,” says Peele. “I feel like her performance is on par with Hannibal Lecter gravitas in this movie.”

“After this movie,” says Duke, “the word ‘Jordan Peele-ian’ is going to enter the film lexicon, and I stand by that.”

Peele has already made one indelible contribution to our cultural vocabulary: the Sunken Place. Just ask Kanye West, who, following his public embrace of Donald Trump, faced widespread accusations that he had taken up residence there. Peele, who once met with West about a possible TV project, is careful on the subject, though he admits to

against black people,” Peele says. West tried to laugh off the idea, posting pictures of weird white walls in his mansion and asking, “Does this look like the Sunken Place?” (The universal answer, of course, was “Yes!”)

“However frustrated I am with what he’s doing, the artist in me is like, ‘He saw my movie!’” Peele says. “The thing about Kanye is, it feels to me that, whatever he’s going through, he’s trying to tell his truth. And there’s something magnetic about people who are trying to tell the truth. I might be wrong, but my feeling is that even when he’s saying something I disagree with, he’s trying to tell his truth, and that’s more than you can say about 90 percent of people.”

Jordan Peele, photographed in Los Angeles on December 12th, 2018, by Frank Ockenfels 3 for Rolling Stone. Grooming by Simone at Exclusive Artists. Styling by Christopher Horan. Rabbits provided by Paws for Effect. Frank Ockenfels 3 for Rolling Stone

There are many moments in *Get Out* that linger; another comes just as Chris, a gifted photographer, learns the true horror of his situation: that a blind, white art dealer was preparing to take over his body. The dealer takes pains to claim that, despite his involvement with a weird body-snatching cult that targets black men, he's not racist. "I want your *eye*, man," the dealer says. "I want those things you see through."

ADVERTISEMENT

There's a lot to unpack there, Peele acknowledges. "For me, the idea is that the guy who is the farthest from racist, the guy who is literally blind, still plays a part in the system of racism. And the way it manifests in that movie is, yeah, a guy who believes that the eye of this better artist, this black artist, is what's separating him from being a success or a failure. Which also, to me, is a commentary on a sentiment I was hearing a lot during the Obama era, this whole mythology of a [purported] advantage of being black in this culture."

There's also more than a hint of a critique of cultural appropriation, and of what Peele calls "racism through fascination," enough so that generations of white hipsters should squirm. "It's totally uncomfortable shit," Peele says, "which is why I love it." I ask Peele if he ever experienced his own version of the "I want your eye" conversation, perhaps with studio executives. "Yeah," he says with a shrug. "I mean, pretty much all the time."

Peele, though, is turning his vision into real power. With *Monkeypaw*, which just co-produced Spike Lee's *BlacKkKlansman*, he's becoming a J.J. Abrams/Spielberg-style creator-mogul, starting to build an empire. "The whole idea of building an empire is so second to the idea of getting to constantly work on these things," Peele insists. "It sounds stupid, but the best reward is getting to work, getting to make, getting to create."

At one point during our Universal trip, we ride a cartoonishly vertical escalator to a scenic point with panoramic views of Los Angeles, distant mountains and all, under the day's clear blue sky. Peele takes it all in for a moment and sighs. "I have so many stories I want to tell," he says.

In This Article: Brian Hiatt, Cover story, Jordan Peele



Want more Rolling Stone? [Sign up for our newsletter.](#)

Features