

THE DEAD OF WINTER

WINNER
Unrestricted
View Horror
Film Festival
2021

LIFT-OFF
GLOBAL
NETWORK
GENRE LABS
2020
OFFICIAL SELECTION

OFFICIAL SELECTION
HORROR
FILM FESTIVAL
HAUS
2020

OFFICIAL SELECTION
Grim North
Screenplay
Festival
2020

A film by Stephen Graves

THE DEAD OF WINTER

A film by Stephen Graves

"It always is Christmas Eve, in a ghost story."

Jerome K Jerome

"Have they no refuge or resource?" cried Scrooge.

"Are there no prisons?" said the Spirit, turning on him for the last time with his own words. "Are there no workhouses?"

Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol

Logline

After an affluent man leaves a rough sleeper to die in the cold on Christmas Eve, he is haunted by a figure that may be a vengeful spirit - or his own guilty conscience.

Short synopsis

On Christmas Eve, HARRY (40s, affluent) is accosted in an alley by the FIGURE of a rough sleeper, who is clearly in a bad way. In a rush, Harry brushes the man off - leaving him to die.

Returning home, Harry is spooked by the eerie sound of ragged, gasping breaths in his driveway. Later, he witnesses the appearance of a strangely familiar Figure on his TV.

That night, Harry is woken by the wind. He sees the Figure standing on his lawn, and heads out to confront it. He gets lost in the fog and stumbles, striking his head; as his life ebbs away, the Figure stands over him...

Director's Statement

In the tradition of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *Dawn of the Dead*, *The Dead of Winter* addresses contemporary social concerns through the heightened reality of the horror genre. A reinterpretation of the classic ghost story, it tackles themes of privilege, social responsibility, guilt and the "fear of the other," through a modern interpretation of the classic ghost story.

The film addresses the current homelessness crisis and the plight of rough sleepers. The number of people in England who are homeless has risen to 280,000 people, up 23,000 since 2016 - at least 5,000 of whom are rough sleepers ([Shelter](#), 2019). A homeless person dies every 19 hours in Britain ([Museum of Homelessness](#), 2019).

The Dead of Winter draws on the stories of Charles Dickens, M.R. James and Henry James, featuring a protagonist who is supernaturally punished for breaking the social contract. It is also a psychological modern ghost story in the vein of *The Innocents*, *Ghost Stories* and BBC Four's *The Dead Room*.



Career progression

I have reached a point in my career where I have developed an understanding of the fundamentals of directing. I am aiming to make the jump to features with a horror film, and am keen to showcase my relevant skills.

The Dead of Winter will demonstrate my ability to manage the ebb and flow of tension within a horror narrative, using techniques such as pacing, sudden shock moments and expressing psychological terror through performance.

Synopsis

On Christmas Eve, HARRY (mid-40s, well-dressed, well-fed) waves off his friends from the pub. He heads into an alley away from the noise of the crowd to call his wife and check what present he is supposed to be buying for his son.

As he hangs up, he is accosted by the FIGURE of a rough sleeper lying in the shadows, clearly in a bad way, his breathing laboured. Harry brushes him off, in a rush to get to the shops before they close. As he hurries back out into the crowds of Christmas shoppers, the rough sleeper breathes a ragged last breath and dies.



Later, Harry drives to his home in the country; as he parks up in his driveway he hears strange, eerie sounds carried on the wind; almost like a last gasping breath. He looks around, but sees nothing; the rear lights of the car flooding the driveway with red light. He walks to the front door, and glances behind him; nothing.



Synopsis (cont'd)

Inside, Harry wraps Christmas presents while the TV plays festive fare. During the commercial break, Harry half-watches charity ads as he cuts wrapping paper. One ad shows a strangely familiar alley, with a strangely familiar Figure standing in it... and Harry cuts the end of his finger with the scissors, blood splashing across the jolly cartoon snowmen on the wrapping paper.

In the middle of the night, Harry is woken by the noise of the wind; it sounds like ragged, laboured breathing. He sees the Figure standing outside, on the edge of the woods; Harry decides to confront it, pulling on a dressing gown and grabbing a (wrapped) cricket bat from beneath the tree.



Outside, freezing fog descends; in his rush to reach the Figure, Harry becomes disorientated. He turns and sees the Figure; startled, he stumbles back into a hollow, striking his head on a tree stump. The Figure stands impassively over Harry as his life ebbs away.



Visual notes

I am keen for *The Dead of Winter* to have an almost documentary feel, rather than a polished, "cinematic" look; supernatural stories have more impact when they seem to be taking place in a real setting. To this end, I would like to shoot on "normal" lenses (eg spherical, 35-50mm), ideally on 16mm film to echo the look of the 1970s BBC Ghost Stories for Christmas directed by Lawrence Gordon Clark (himself a documentarian).

Over the course of the film, the colour palette drains from the frame; the opening scenes show brightly-coloured Christmas lights, Harry wearing a vibrant jumper, etc. By the end of the film, as Harry pursues the Figure into the mists, the picture is almost monochrome; silhouetted figures against the grey-white fog.

I am particularly keen to maintain the ambiguity that the Figure could be a figment of Harry's imagination; it never takes direct action against him, and any malevolence on its part is attributed to it by Harry. The film will use similar techniques to those employed by Jack Clayton in *The Innocents*. The Figure is seen through frosted windows, through fog at a distance - and most importantly, every time the Figure appears, we see Harry's reaction to it *before* seeing the Figure itself. I also intend to use the Schüfftan process, as employed in *Blade Runner*, to lend an eerie glow to the Figure's eyes.

As Harry becomes progressively more unsettled, the visuals will switch from static shots to handheld, and will use a closer framing to build a claustrophobic feel and focus on Harry's emotional turmoil. Slight vignetting around the edges of the image will heighten the claustrophobic, subjective feel of the image.

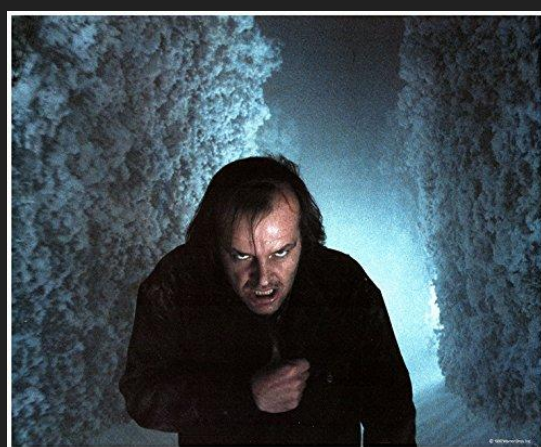
The final sequence will echo the surreal feel of *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (dir. Jonathan Miller, 1968), with its fog, swirling winds and snow, and close-up shots.

This also has the practical effect of meaning that the final snowstorm sequence will mostly be realised through handheld, close shots against a foggy backdrop, making it achievable within a limited budget!

Mood board



Mood board



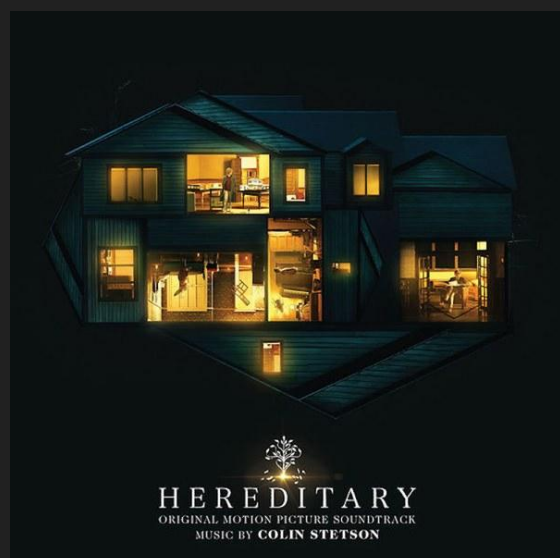
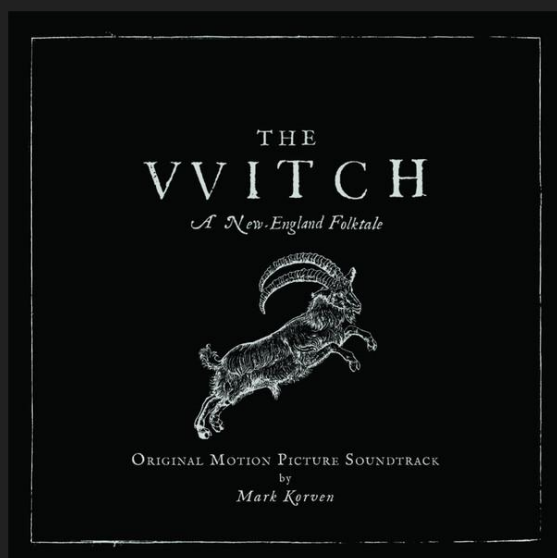
Sound design and music

"There's no music. The score is entirely created from sound effects. I didn't want to hammer anything out. I love that about Lawrence Gordon Clark's *Ghost Stories*. They're very spare. You don't see the ghost for a long time, and there's a slow accumulation of dread. It really does exert something very special if you get it right. If you don't overdo it, it brings you to a very particular place of fear."

Mark Gatiss

To maintain *The Dead of Winter's* documentary feel, I intend to stick with diegetic music and a pared-back, minimalist score that uses drones and eerie sound effects. For inspiration, I am looking at scores such as Mark Korven's *The Witch* (dir. Robert Eggers, 2015) or Colin Stetson's *Hereditary* (dir. Ari Aster, 2018). The soundtrack will be created by manipulating organic and acoustic sounds, rather than electronic elements, similar to the effects created by Mark Korven's "apprehension engine".

Sound effects will be particularly important in conjuring the story's mood, including the ragged breathing that heralds the appearance of the Figure, the ambiguous words heard on the breeze, and the muffling effect of the fog in the final confrontation between Harry and the Figure.



Release strategy

The Dead of Winter will initially be aimed at prestige horror and fantasy film festivals including FrightFest, Sitges Film Festival, Fantasporto, FilmQuest, Abertoir, Screamefest, Telluride Horror Show, Toronto After Dark and Fantastic Fest.

We will then roll it out to more mainstream film festivals such as the BFI London Film Festival, Raindance, London Short Film Festival, Encounters Film Festival and Aesthetica Short Film Festival.

We plan to secure wider distribution on digital through the ALTER YouTube channel (my earlier work has been featured on sister channel DUST).

The Dead of Winter was part-funded through a novel method leveraging NFTs and cryptocurrency, using First Flights' FF3 platform. We intend to embrace the growing Web3 film movement in our release strategy.

We will create a limited-run NFT release on the Secret Network blockchain, as used by Kevin Smith for his film *Killroy Was Here*. *The Dead of Winter* NFTs will be airdropped to *Killroy* NFT holders, with an additional portion held for sale to the wider public. *Killroy* NFT holders will be given the option of paying through an "honesty box."

All proceeds from the NFT sale on Secret Network will be distributed to our charity partner.



Crew biography

Writer/Director – Stephen Graves

Stephen Graves has written, directed and produced award-winning narrative short films across a range of genres including comedy, horror and drama.

His work has screened in film festivals including Raindance, the East End Film Festival and the London Independent Film Festival.

He has produced commercial videos for titles such as N by Norwegian magazine, Campaign and Stuff, and for clients including Sony, LG and The Trade Desk.



Crew biography

Producer – Nicci Brighten

Nicci Brighten is an award-winning British actress and producer passionate about genre-based drama and comedy filmmaking. She has a BA (Hons) degree in Film and English, sits on the jury for the Kino London Short Film Festival, and is mum to Evie Rose (5).

Nicci's credits include psychological horror *A Doll Distorted* (Short of the Week 2020, ALTER 2022) and *Samaritan*, based on the Brexit vote and climate crisis. Both films received official selections, nominations and wins from Academy Award, BAFTA and BIFA-qualifying festivals worldwide. *Samaritan* featured in the Climate Story Lab UK 2020 and premiered on YouTube channel Omeleto in 2021 with 51k views to date and won The Weather Channel x Pattnr \$10k #EarthFilmChallenge in August 2021. Nicci's most recent film, *Eric*, a dark comedy about the perils of modern dating, is on the festival circuit and has so far been selected for the BIFA-recognised Barnes Film Festival and top UK and US genre film festivals FrightFest, Screampfest and FilmQuest.

Superbright Pictures is an award-winning, artist-driven, London-based production agency founded by Nicci Brighten in 2020, creating visionary, social impact narrative and commercial content. Their work celebrates ability, champions causes with heart and showcases life and storytelling in all its unique forms, quirks and colours.



Contact

Stephen Graves

Writer/Director

T: +44 (0)7312 254 857

E: stephengraves1981@gmail.com

W: www.stephengraves.co.uk

Nicci Brighten

Producer

T: +44 (0)7796 306 836

E: superbrightpictures@gmail.com

W: www.superbrightpictures.com



SUPERBRIGHT
PICTURES